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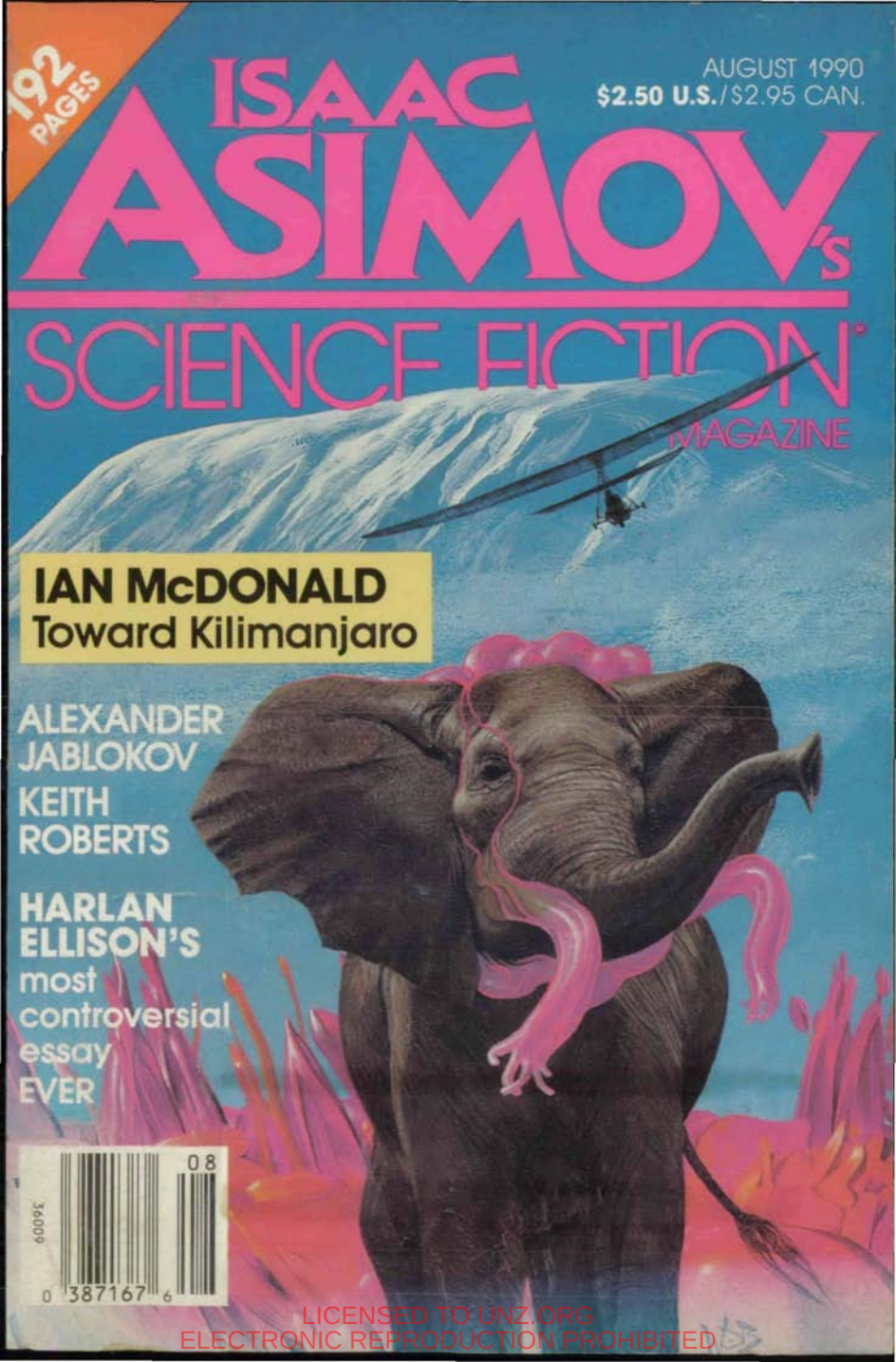
ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE



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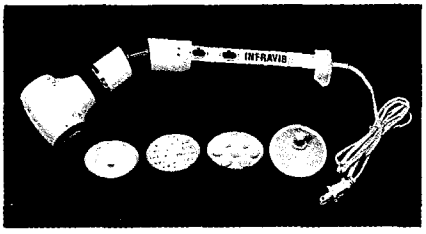

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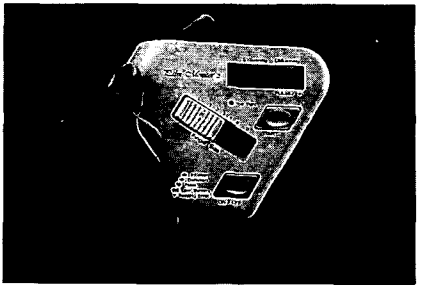

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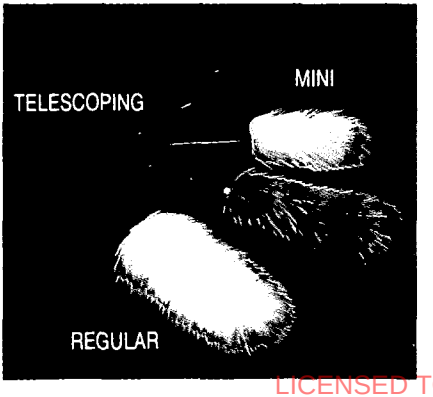

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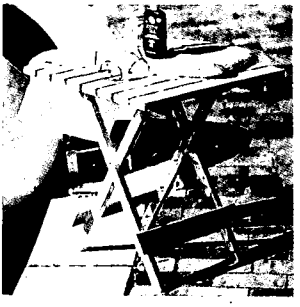

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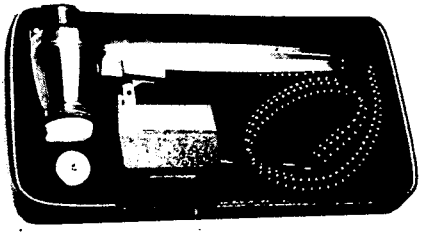

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TOR PRESENTS

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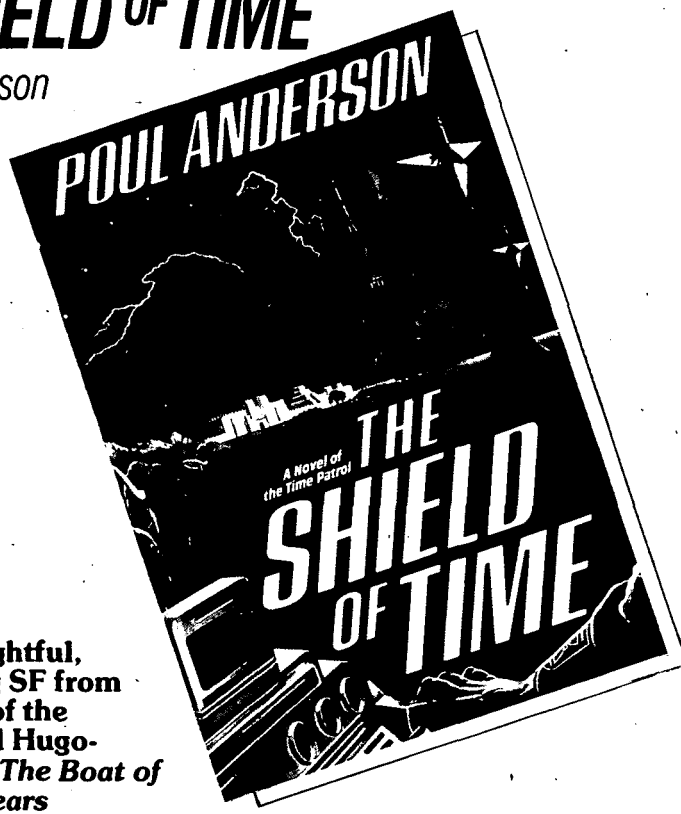
Poul Anderson



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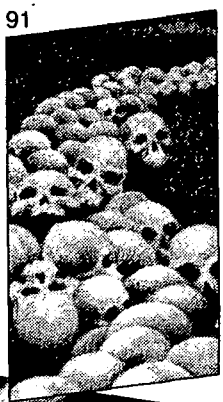

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

SHARING UNIVERSES

In recent years, I have noticed that a number of science fiction writers and readers are grumbling about the habit of sharing universes.

Perhaps the feeling is that if an established writer decides to write a story using the universe worked up by, and associated with, another established writer, then perhaps the first writer is too lazy to make up his own devices and is trying to have a free ride. Or perhaps the feeling is that the writer whose universe is being used gets his cut and *he's* the one who is trying to have a free ride.

Another way of looking at it is this. Young writers by hooking on to certain established universes get a better chance at publishing and a better break where space on the shelves is concerned. This is important because the number of paperback novels of science fiction and fantasy (mostly fantasy, it seems to me) is so great that there is no room for them on the shelves. They come in, are placed on the shelves and a week or two later, another spate arrives and off go the first set to be replaced by the second, who are in turn replaced by a third soon enough, and so on. The result is that no one makes much money.

There are, however, some recognized "big names" who remain on the shelves permanently, and if a young writer can snuggle up under one of those names, he lasts longer (perhaps) and makes more money. How unfair to those who don't!

However, I want to argue against these views and champion the cause of the shared universe.

In the first place, universe-sharing is always treated as a new phenomenon, a mark of the degeneration of our times, but this is not so. The shared universe is as old as literature.

Back about 800 B.C., Homer (assuming he really existed) composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and in doing so created a universe that writers have been sharing ever since. A large number of Greek writers wrote epics dealing with events before and after the events described by Homer. They couldn't have been very good, in comparison, for none of these have survived.

However, Vergil wrote the

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Aeneid, which was an unabashed imitation of Homer (very polished but lacking vigor) and that survived. Other Homer-type epics were written in the Middle Ages and John Milton in the seventeenth century wrote *Paradise Lost,* which was magnificent but was redolent of Homer in many places.

And of course, retellings of the Homer tale have come down to modern times. Homer's universe has been shared, copiously, for twenty-seven centuries.

Another example is the cycle of legends concerning King Arthur. That began with Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* in the fifteenth century and, for five hundred years, numerous writers have had free rides at Malory's expense. I need only mention T. H. White's *Once and Future King,* begun in 1938, which was made into the musical comedy *Camelot,* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's recent *The Mists of Avalon.*

There are innumerable other examples. Richard Wagner made use of the Volsunga Saga to prepare his *Ring Cycle,* which, except for the music, is pitiful. L. Sprague de Camp, in 1940, wrote a terrific story *The Roaring Trumpet,* which was a retelling of the best of all the Norse myths, which you can find in the works of Snorri Sturleson of Iceland, back in 1200.

In fact, to go further, a large percentage of the fantasy novels that cram the paperback store bookshelves are themselves examples of shared universes. They are, it

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seems to me, adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's universe in *Lord of the Rings,* sometimes slavishly so.

So please, let's not take the attitude that sharing universes is something new and pathological. It isn't.

Of course, there's a change in modern times that is called "copyright." You can steal from Homer, Malory, or Sturleson all you want. No one can stop you. Nowadays, however, the stealing must be circumspect or you can lay yourself open to legal action.

Of course, circumspection works. I don't know how many writers have written robot stories in which the Three Laws of Robotics are *assumed.* They don't quote the Laws (that would get them in trouble) but they can count on the readers knowing about it. Or Steven Spielberg can deal with galactic empires in *Star Wars* and rely on the subject being familiar to some of his viewers because of the *Foundation* series.

But I don't complain. After all, my notion of benevolent robots was borrowed from Lester del Rey's *Helen O'Loy* and Eando Binder's *Adam Link* series. And my galactic empire owed its existence (as I frequently say) "To a tiny bit of cribbin' / From the works of Edward Gibbon."

But there's more to my case than just the claim that "everyone does it." There are definite advantages.

For instance, in the last dozen years, I have helped edit over a hundred anthologies, along with my marvelous friend, Martin H. Greenberg, who does all the scutwork (permissions, payments, etc.). My name appears in the title of almost all these anthologies. I assure you I don't make very much money out of anthologies as compared with books I write myself. Why do I do it then? Just for the pleasure of seeing my name in print? No! I've seen my name in print *enough.*

I do it because the anthologies are a way of bringing old and sometimes forgotten stories back into print for the delectation of new readers who may never have read them in their original incarnation. They represent an earned sum of money to some older writers, giving them satisfaction, and perhaps encouraging them to write again. Personally, I think it's a useful service all around.

Here's another case. It occurred to Marty that people might enjoy reading a novelization of my classic story "Nightfall," which first appeared in print nearly half a century ago, and which, I have seen to it, is periodically reprinted. But he asked me to novelize it, tell it much more in depth, tell what happened before the story as I had it and what happened afterward. I refused. I didn't want to return to something that was over and done with so long ago, and I had other things I desperately wanted to do.

So Marty asked Robert Silverberg. Bob, who loved the story, was anxious to do the job and asked permission. Cautiously, I asked to

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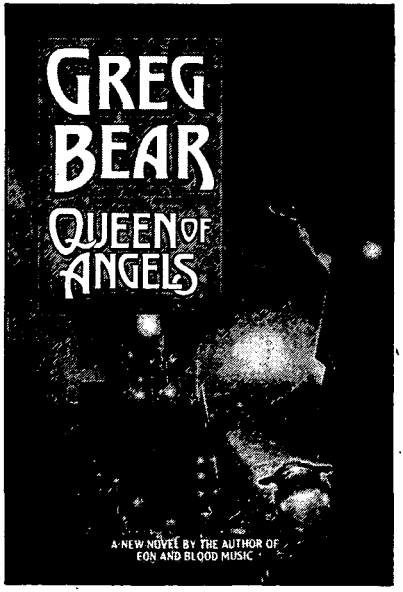

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see an outline, and I loved it. We discussed it and he then wrote the novel and we discussed *that*. I think it's magnificent and it will appear this year under both our names (equal size). I'm not looking for a free ride; I supply the basic idea and development and participate in the expansion—and I'm busily engaged in other things, too. Bob isn't looking for a free ride. He worked hard, keeping my original story intact and making the additions quite "Asimovian" in character. We are looking to do this for two other stories of mine, too, and we think it will help everyone: Bob and me and the readers.

Another thing, Byron Preiss, who is a packager of books, and a very good one, had the idea of publishing a series of interconnected novels under the overall heading of "Isaac Asimov Presents Robot City." The stories will be written by young writers who will have my permission to use the Three Laws of Robotics for the purpose.

My part, aside from granting the permission, is to write introductions in which I discuss those aspects of robotics that are taken up by the stories. I have done this now for no fewer than twelve of the books.

Here, again, my earnings are minimal. What I am doing is to use the umbrella of my name to help out young writers. I wish I could do that for everyone, but I can't. I can only do it for a few, but a few are better than none, and I don't choose them. Byron Preiss chooses them and he does so on the basis of how well they write to begin with.

Davis Publications has also done a series of six books under the overall blanket of "Isaac Asimov Presents." These were not robot stories, but dealt with any subjects the writers wished to deal with and I wrote introductions on those subjects.

And of course, I have this magazine, with my name in the title, which is now in its 13th year and of which this is the 159th issue. It, too, serves as an additional outlet for the science fiction short story, and that is exceedingly important. The money, I admit, lies in novels, but not everyone can afford, at the very start, to invest the time and effort required for a novel. It is better to sharpen one's teeth on short stories until one reaches a point where one dares attempt the novel.

So there you are. The points I am making are that sharing literary universes is as old as literature, that it has always permeated modern science fiction writing, and that properly done, it enables old relics like myself to help other people, particularly young writers. I don't think that's so bad. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Gardner:

How ironic to find myself (by Paul Osborn, in the December issue) accused of being insufficiently respectful of Henry Kuttner by giving sole credit to C.L. Moore for the authorship of "Vintage Season." In truth I yield to no one in my admiration of Kuttner, have done all I could as an anthologist to restore his superb stories to print, and in my critical/autobiographical book *Robert Silverberg's Worlds of Wonder* devoted a chapter to him in which I called him "the master of the science fiction short story." Kuttner is in danger of being forgotten, as Mr. Osborn says, but most definitely not by me.

It has always been my impression, though, that Moore wrote "Vintage Season" by herself—an impression fostered by various authorities, most notably Lester del Rey, who included the story in his 1975 Ballantine collection, *The Best of C.L. Moore.*

At Mr. Osborn's suggestion I've hunted up the George O. Smith anecdote he cites, and it does indeed provide conclusive evidence that "Vintage Season" was a Kuttner-Moore collaboration. I'm grateful to him for clarifying this for me, and I very much regret the (completely unintended) slight to Kuttner in my introduction to "In Another Country."

Best,

Robert Silverberg
Oakland, CA

Ah, the dangers of collaboration and misattribution! Suddenly, I want to put something on record for my own husband-wife collaborations. Janet and I have published half a dozen "Norby" books, with others in press. Well, lest any mistake be made, she does 90 percent of the work on them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am concerned about the prevailing belief in SF writer's circles, to wit that a Christian is always narrow-minded. In some respects, this is true. "Narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life."

On the other hand, a Christian can think about and even write about the most mind-boggling concepts without a qualm provided one thing only: he does not have to regard the creations of his mind as being on the same level as the truths of his faith.

It would be pleasant to think that all SF writers were Christian or all Christians SF writers, but

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such is obviously not the case. Many writers write from standpoints (such as materialism or Buddhism) which are less logically justifiable than Christianity. I would assume that you, yourself, write from a materialistic standpoint, heavily influenced by misinterpretations of the sciences.

While I have enjoyed several of the stories in recent issues (most notably the two by Avram Davidson and the story by Lucius Shepard, "The Father of Stones") I would like to issue a challenge to the readership, and particularly the Christian readership (I believe there is such a group). The challenge is to weave an SF story around a Christian theme without misinterpreting Christian doctrine. I am trying at the present moment to write such a novel, but at this time, writing a short story is beyond my capabilities. If this could be done well, it would be a great step forward from the morass of materialism and the sneering self-complacency of atheism.

Michael R. Simmons
Pineville, LA

I'm all for the Christian readership writing an SF story about a Christian theme without misinterpreting Christian doctrine—if they would like to take a chance. For two thousand years, after all, pious Christians have been denouncing other pious Christians and consigning them to hell (and sometimes killing them) for minor variations in Christian doctrine. Avoiding misinterpretation would seem a really enormous task, therefore.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

When I read your November Editorial, "Half Done," I had a mental whoop of joy! Although you expressed it in fractional-time terms, you have noticed something that was apparent to me (and other scholars), almost twenty years ago. The RATE of evolutionary change has accelerated!

I first realized this after reading Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit mystic, paleontologist, and brilliant writer. He assumes this in *The Phenomenon of Man, The Future of Man,* and almost all his other scientific writing (as opposed to his devotional works). Although Teilhard died in 1942, his "forecast" of an increasing RATE of change was right on target, even as far as today's technology goes. His most forward claim—that humanity was approaching an era of "hyper-consciousness," a trend toward greater homogenization at the interpersonal level, seems to me "right on target." It appears to be happening at many discernible levels of human existence NOW.

Glad you caught up with us doddering theologians!

Cordially,

The Rev. Robert M. Reitz (ret.)
1521 Rush Road
Wickliffe, OH 44092

Well, now, the rate of evolutionary change seems to be increasing if we concentrate on those matters that seem important to us. It is also possible to write an essay that would show that the rate of evolutionary change has steadily decreased since the instants following the big bang.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov,
Editor Dozois, et al:

I've been reading *IAsfm* for quite some time now (of course!), and am continually amazed (astounded? astonished? other?) at the variety of material you publish. Robert Silverberg's "Chip Runner" is a case in point. This one begins as science fiction and then dives straight into fantasy—and Mr. Silverberg pulls it off very well. (It was also a very nice "adolescent Rite of Passage" story, which intensified its emotional impact.) The pure fantasy element in the story was, of course, Timothy's ability to somehow transfer his consciousness into the microscopic realm, into a computer chip. (The therapist/narrator also manifested this same ability in several dream sequences, so I suppose it must be "catching!") In the hands of a less skillful writer, this story would probably have read like a 1930s pulp version of "mad-scientist-shrinks-someone-into-microscopic-world;" but this was not the case. I was so engrossed in the *story* itself that I had little trouble accepting the concept that Timothy could and did project his consciousness "down into the angstroms," so to speak.

At any rate, I've found that when I read an issue of *Asimov's,* I can be assured of *good stories,* whether they be science fiction, fantasy, or, as with Mr. Silverberg's tale, a nifty blend of both.

Bobby G. Warner
Wedgefield, SC 29168

Robert Silverberg is a good writer. He has done a novelization of my novelette, Nightfall, *which will be out sometime this year. You wait till you see that. It's extremely good, though (if I weren't a model of modesty) I might mention he had good stuff to work with.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov;

I have just finished reading your editorial in the December issue titled "Distraction." It has served as the motivation for this letter. I find, unlike yourself, that the greatest distraction for me is the typewriter! As my mind soars in flights of fancy, I am confounded by my lack of speed. This is perhaps due to lack of practice, and possibly extreme concern about spelling and punctuation. Some people have the ability to speak into a tape recorder, to capture the thoughts foremost in their minds and edit them later. I find talking to a machine out loud a bit disturbing, not really much different than talking to yourself. I do believe though that if I continue to plod along, forcing myself to master this keyboard-medium, I may yet overcome what I feel is probably the greatest handicap to anyone who desires to express themselves in the written word.

I have been an avid reader since a very young age, and you have been a source of great inspiration, and countless hours of enjoyment. I had a rather unusual introduction to science fiction at the age of eighteen (about 1968). My local library sent me notification that they were holding a book I had reserved. This book was *Stranger in a Strange Land.* I had never requested that book, and to this day

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I do not know who did. This mix-up did stimulate my curiosity, however, and I sought out this book and many other works by Robert Heinlein. Then I discovered your books, Dr. Asimov, and have been a true fan of science fiction ever since. My library boasts twelve hardbound collections of your work, and I have read literally hundreds of your stories. Of course when I found your name on a science fiction magazine I had to subscribe, I have not been disappointed yet!

Sincerely

James L. Sartor

Don't give up. If you can ever afford a word-processor, you can edit your work as you go along, correcting misspellings and adjusting grammar and word order and leaving no sign behind. No erasures, no x-ing out, no whiteners—it looks just as if you had gotten it perfectly correct the first time. Then editors will say, "What a marvelous typist" and read you with warmth and sympathy.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor Asimov:

I haven't written to a science fiction magazine since the demise of *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. My interest in science fiction dates back to the mid-1930s when "Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century" was a daily fifteen minute program on the radio. (How I miss those old radio shows of science fiction and fantasy!)

I will be seventy-one years old tomorrow—Oct. 13, 1989. You will not remember it, but you and I corresponded for a while when we were both young men and you were selling stories to the many magazines that were available back then and I was trying to do so. I could never manage to get one accepted, though the late Sam Merwin, Jr., almost bought one.

I read every issue of *Asimov's* and generally speaking, I enjoy the yarns tremendously. The ones I don't enjoy are those written for folk with more intelligence or education than I. Like the letters in the letter section from intellectuals, I don't know what the hell they are talking about.

I often work as a security guard in one of Gastonia's many textile plants in order to earn a bit of money to supplement my rather meager Social Security check and often I read the magazine late at night while waiting time to make another round with the time clock—a devilish device that tells on you if you don't make the proper tour because you have to insert keys stationed at various intervals that punch a disk showing the time visited each station. Often I become so engrossed in a story that the time slips up on me and I almost miss a round—inexcusable in the security guard business!

Later this month I plan to attend a science fiction convention in Oak Ridge, TN., along with one of science fiction's most devoted fans, Lynn Hickman of Wauseon, Ohio. Unlike the Good Doctor, I enjoy traveling when I can afford to—though the closest I've been to the Good Doctor's beloved New York City was when I was in Connecticut in 1977 and passed a sign that read, "New York City, 90

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Miles." Perhaps someday I shall realize a life-long ambition to visit the city.

I recently saw the Good Doctor on television and admired the true Manhattan accent. It is almost as beautiful as our Southern accent.

I sincerely hope that *Asimov's* will continue for a long time. It, next to a willing woman, is one's best late-night companion.

Most sincerely yours,

Wilkie Conner
Gastonia, NC

I have reached the age where I take it as almost a personal insult to have anyone dare be older than I am—but you've made it and for the sake of nostalgia I forgive you. Actually, mine is not a Manhattan accent, but a Brooklyn accent. We New Yorkers are meticulous in such matters.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As a number of readers have no doubt written you, the Chameleon Corps stories referred to by Mike Putek in your December issue were written by Ron Goulart. Five of them are collected in *The Chameleon Corps & Other Shape Changers,* which was originally published by Macmillan in 1972. I don't know whether it is still available from any publisher. Goulart has also written some recent novels about the Corps in a series called "The Ex-Chameleon." Sorry, I don't have titles or other information. Could you perhaps forward this information to Mr. Putek, since his address was not printed in the magazine?

As long as I am writing, I must make one comment regarding your statement that "writing fantasy is like writing science fiction without a net." As a lover of both forms, I'd like to amend that. Writing *good* fantasy is like writing science fiction with a net you've constructed yourself.

Very truly yours,

Janice M. Eisen
Schenectady, NY

We have received a number of letters educating us on the matter of the Chameleon Corps. Gardner and I are abashed. However, remember that there are now enormous numbers of SF/fantasy books published and that both Gardner and I have more-than-full time jobs so that we fall behind on our reading. (No one can be farther behind than I am.) And I accept your remark about fantasy and nets; I think you're right.

—Isaac Asimov

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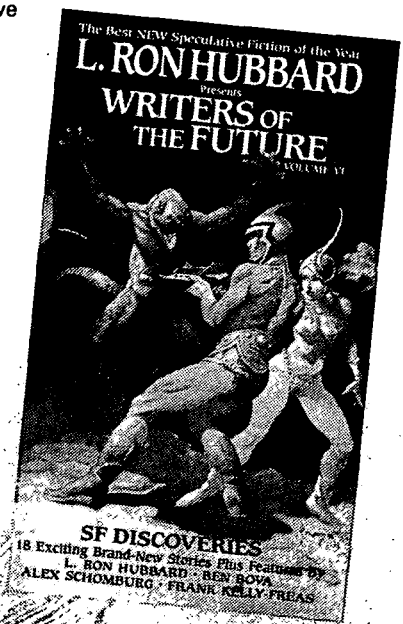
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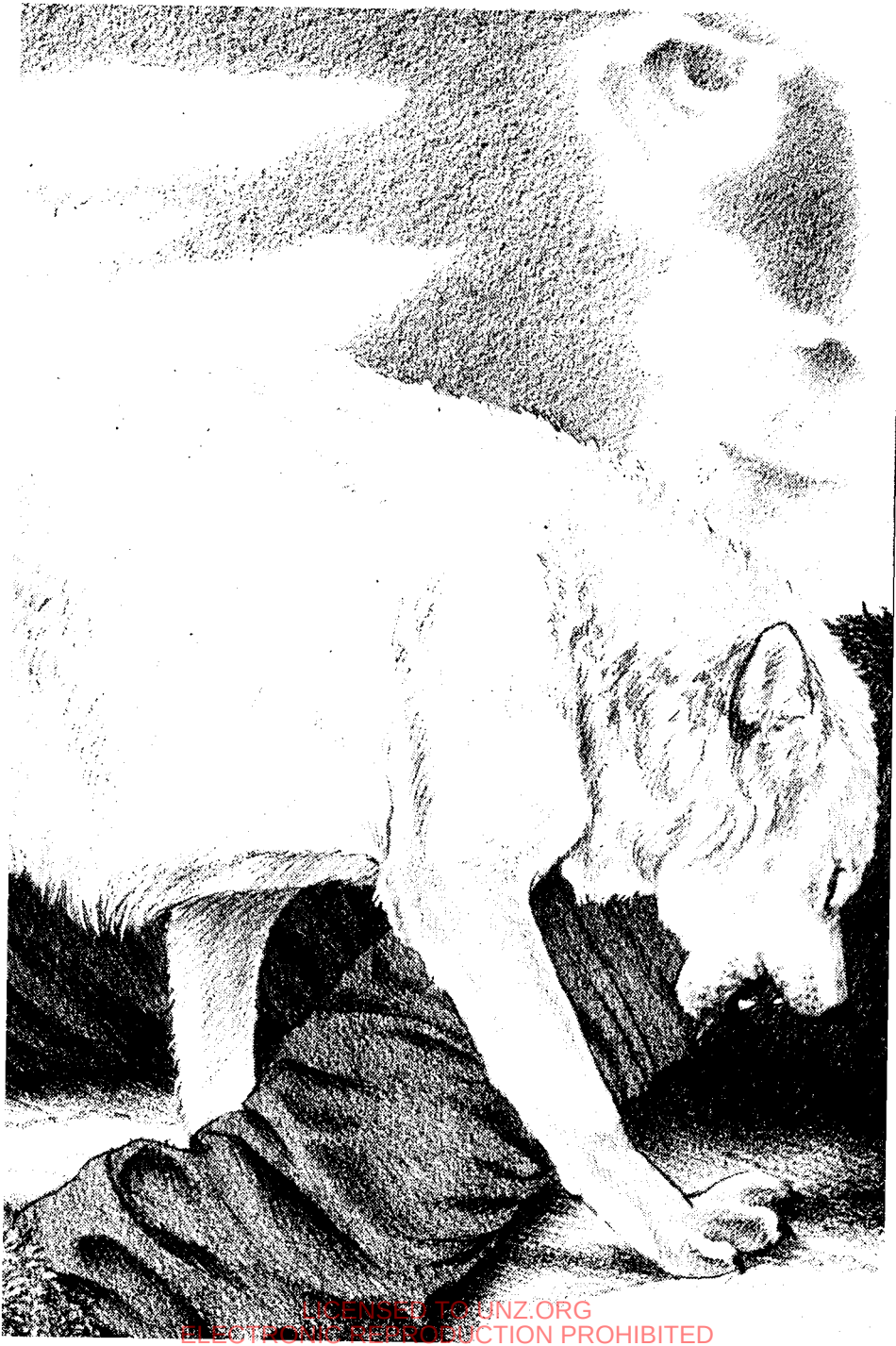

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by Alexander Jablokov

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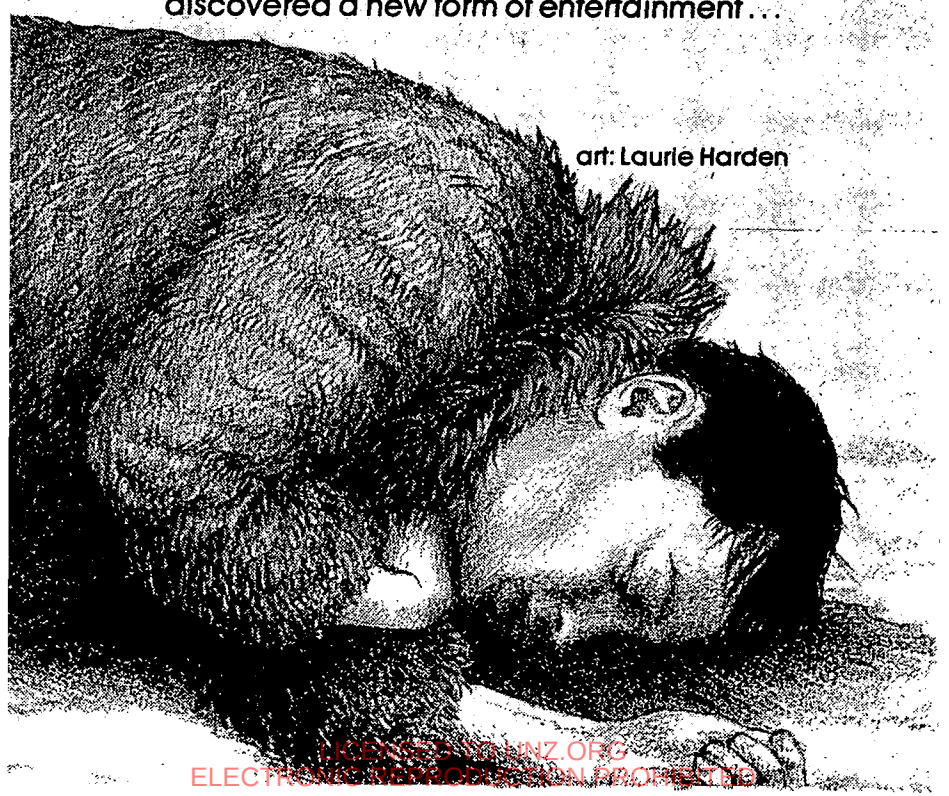
art: Laurie Harden



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The snowshoe hare's half-eaten carcass lay under the deadfall of the figure-four trap, frozen blood crystallized on its fur, mouth still closed around the tiny piece of desiccated carrot which had served as bait. The snow was flattened around it, the rabbit's fur thrown everywhere. Jack London sniffed at the trap, laid its ears back, and growled. Canine bona fides reaffirmed, it settled back on its haunches and looked expectantly up at the man. Part samoyed, part husky, Jack's thick white fur concealed a body thin from hunger.

Elam didn't have to sniff. The stink of wolverine was malevolent in the still air. It turned the saliva that had come into his mouth at the thought of roasted hare into something spoiled. He spat. "Damn!" The trap couldn't be descented. He'd have to make another. No animal would come anywhere near a trap that smelled like that. The wolverine probably hadn't even been hungry.

He pulled the dry carrot from the rabbit's mouth and flung the remains off among the trees. The deadfall and the sticks of the figure four followed it, vanishing in puffs of snow.

"That's the last one, Jack," Elam said. "Nothing, again." The dog whined.

They set off among the dark smooth trunks of the maples and beeches, Elam's snowshoes squeaking in the freshly fallen snow. The dog turned its head, disturbed by the unprofessional noise, then loped off to investigate the upturned roots of a fallen tree. A breeze from the great lake to the north pushed its way through the trees, shouldering clumps of snow from the branches as it passed. A cardinal flashed from bough to bough, bright against the clearing evening sky.

Elam, a slender, graceful man, walked with his narrow shoulders hunched up, annoyed by the chilly bombardment from above. His clothing was entirely of furry animal pelts sewn crudely together. His thick hat was muskrat, his jacket fox and beaver, his mittens rabbit, his pants elk. At night he slept in a sack made of a grizzly's hide. How had he come to be here? Had he killed those animals, skinned them, cured their hides? He didn't know.

At night, sometimes, before he went to sleep, Elam would lie in his lean-to and, by the light of the dying fire, examine these clothes, running his hands through the fur, seeking memories in their thick softness. The various pelts were stitched neatly together. Had he done the sewing? Or had a wife or a sister? The thought gave him a curious feeling in the pit of his stomach. He rather suspected that he had always been alone. Weariness would claim him quickly, and he would huddle down in the warmth of the bear fur and fall asleep, questions unanswered.

Tree roots examined, Jack London returned to lead the way up the ridge. It was a daily ritual, practiced just at sunset, and the dog knew

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it well. The tumbled glacial rocks were now hidden under snow, making the footing uncertain. Elam carried his snowshoes under one arm as he climbed.

The height of the ridge topped the bare trees. To the north, glowing a deceptively warm red, was the snow-covered expanse of the great lake, where Elam often saw the dark forms of wolves, running and reveling in their temporary triumph over the water that barred their passage to the islands the rest of the year.

Elam had no idea what body of water it was. He had tentatively decided on Lake Superior, though it could have been Lake Winnipeg, or, for that matter, Lake Baikal. Elam sat down on a rock and stared at the deep north, where stars already gleamed in the sky. Perhaps he had it all wrong, and a new Ice Age was here, and this was a frozen Victoria Nyanza.

"Who am I, Jack? Do you know?"

The dog regarded him quizzically, used to the question by now. The man who's supposed to get us some food, the look said. Philosophical discussions later.

"Did I come here myself, Jack, or was I put here?"

Weary of the pointless and one-sided catechism, the dog was barking at a jay that had ventured too close. It circled for a moment, squawked, and shot off back into the forest.

The lake wind freshened and grew colder, driving the last clouds from the sky. The exposed skin on Elam's cheeks tightened. "Let's go, Jack." He pulled off a mitten and plunged his hand into a pocket, feeling his last chunk of pemmican, greasy and hard.

Aside from a few pathetically withered bits of carrot, which he needed to bait his traps, this was the last bit of food left him. He'd been saving it for an emergency. Every trap on the trapline that ran through these woods had been empty or befouled by wolverines, even in a hard winter that should have driven animals to eat anything. He would eat the pemmican that night.

Man and dog started their descent down the twilit reach of the ridge's other side. As they reached the base, Elam, his hand once again feeling the pemmican, afraid that it too would vanish before he could eat it, took too long a step and felt his right foot slide on the icy face of a tilted rock. His left foot caught in the narrow crack of an ice-shattered boulder, which grabbed him like a tight fist. The world flung itself forward at him. He felt the dull snap in his leg as the icy rock met his face.

He awoke to the warm licks of Jack London's tongue turning instantly cold on his face. He lay tumbled on his back among the rocks, head tilting downward, trees looming overhead. Annoyed, he pushed back and tried to stand. Searing agony in his leg brought bile to the back of his throat

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and a hot sweat over his body. He moaned and almost lost consciousness again, then held himself up on his elbows. His face was cut, some of his teeth were cracked, he could taste the blood in his mouth, but his leg, his leg . . . he looked down.

His left leg bent at an unnatural angle just below the knee. The leather of his trousers was soaked black with blood. Compound fracture of the . . . tibia? Fibula? For one distracted instant naming the shattered bone was the most important thing in the world. It obscured the knowledge that he was going to die.

He shifted position and moaned again. The biting pain in his leg grew sharp burning teeth whenever he moved, but wore the edges off if he lay still, subsiding to a gnaw. With a sudden effort, he pulled the leg straight, then fell back, gasping harshly. It made no difference, of course, but seeing the leg at that angle made him uncomfortable. It looked better this way, not near so painful.

He patted the dog on the head. "Sorry, Jack. I screwed up." The dog whined in agreement. Elam fell back and let the darkness take him.

His body did not give up so easily. He regained consciousness some time later, the frenzied whining and yelping of his dog sounding in his ears. He lay prone in the snow, his hands dug in ahead of him. His mittens were torn, and he could not feel his hands.

He rolled over onto his back and looked over his feet. Full night had come, but the starlight and the moon were enough to see the trail his body had left through the snow. Elam sighed. What a waste of time. The pain in his broken leg was almost gone, as was all other feeling from the thighs down. He spat. The spittle crackled on the snow. Damn cold. And the dog was annoying him with its whining.

"Sure boy, sure," he said, gasping from the cold weight of death on his chest. "Just a minute, Jack. Just a minute."

He pulled what was left of the fur glove off with his chin and reached the unfeeling claw of his hand into his pocket. It took a dozen tries before it emerged holding the pemmican.

He finally managed to open the front of his jacket and unlace his shirt. Cold air licked in eagerly. He smeared the greasy, hard pemmican over his chest and throat like a healing salve. Its rancid odor bit at his nose and, despite himself, he felt a moment of hunger. He shoved the rest of the piece down deep into his shirt.

"Here, Jack," he said. "Here. Dinner." The moon rode overhead, half in sunlight, the other half covered with glittering lines and spots.

The dog snuffled, suddenly frightened and suspicious. Elam reached up and patted it on the head. Jack London moved forward. Smelling the meat, its hunger overcame its caution at its master's strange behavior and it began to lick eagerly at Elam's throat and chest. The dog was

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desperately hungry. In its eagerness, a sharp tooth cut the man's skin, and thick, warm, blood welled out. The tongue licked more quickly. More cuts. More blood, steaming aromatically in the cold air. And the dog was hungry. The smell penetrated to the deepest parts of its brain, finally destroying the overlay of training, habit, and love. The dog's teeth tore and it began to feed.

And in that instant, Elam remembered. He saw the warm forests of his youth, and the face, so much like his, that had become his own. Justice had at last been done. Elam was going to die. He smiled slightly, gasped once, then his eyes glazed blank.

When it was sated, and realized what it had done, the dog howled its pain at the stars. It then sprang into the forest and ran madly, leaving the man's tattered remains far behind.

"Is that all you are going to do from now on?" Reqata said. "Commit suicide? Just lie down and die? Nice touch, I admit, the dog." She held his shoulder in a tight grip and looked past him with her phosphorescent eyes. "A real Elam touch."

Five dark ribs supported the smooth yellow stone of the dome. They revealed the green gleam of beetle carapaces in the light of the flames hanging in a hexagon around the central axis of the view chamber. Rows of striated marble seats climbed the chamber in concentric circles. The inhabitants of these seats stared down at the corpse lying in the snow at their feet.

Elam was himself startled at his clone's acquiescence in its own death, but he was surrounded by admirers before he could answer her. They moved past him, murmuring, gaining haut by their admiration for the subtlety of his work.

Elam stared past them at his own corpse, a sheen of frost already obscuring the face, turning it into an abstract composition. He had died well. He always did. His mind, back from the clone with its memories restored, seemed to rattle loosely around his skull. His skin was slick with amniotic fluid, his joints gritty. Nothing fit together. Reqata's hand on his shoulder seemed to bend the arbitrarily shaped bones, reminding him of his accidental quality.

"An artist who works with himself as both raw materials and subject can never transcend either," Reqata said.

Her scorn cut through the admiration around him. He looked up at her, and she smiled back with ebony teeth, flicking feathery eyelashes. She raised one hand in an angular gesture which identified her instantly, whatever body she was in.

"And how does the choreographer of mass death transcend her material?" Elam's mind had been gone for weeks, dying in a frozen forest,

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and Reqata had grown bored in his absence. She needed entertainment. Even lovers constantly dueled with haut, the indefinable quality that all players at the Floating Game understood implicitly. Reqata had much haut. Elam had more.

He squirmed. Was his bladder full, or did he always feel this way?

"Mass death, as you put it, is limited by practical problems," Reqata answered. "Killing one man is an existential act. Killing a million would be a historic act, at least to the Bound. Killing them all would be a divine act." She ran her fingers through his hair. He smelled the winy crispness of her breath. "Killing yourself merely smacks of lack of initiative. I'm disappointed in you, Elam. You used to fight before you died."

"I did, didn't I?" He remembered the desperate struggles of his early works, the ones that had gained him his haut. Men dying in mine shafts, on cliff sides, in predator-infested jungles. Men who had never stopped fighting. Each of those men had been himself. Something had changed.

"Tell me something," Reqata said, leaning forward. Her tongue darted across his earlobe. "Why do you always look so peaceful just before you die?"

A chill spread up his spine. He'd wondered the same thing himself. "Do I?" He squeezed the words out. He always paid. Five or ten minutes of memory, the final instants of life. The last thing he remembered from this particular work was pulling the pemmican from his pocket. After that, blackness. The dying clone Elam understood something the resurrected real Elam did not.

"Certainly. Don't be coy. Look at the grin on that corpse's frozen face." She slid into the seat next to him, draping a leg negligently into the aisle. "I've tried dying. Not as art, just as experience. I die screaming. My screams echo for weeks." She shuddered, hands pressed over her ears. Her current body, as usual, had a high rib cage and small, firm breasts. Elam found himself staring at them. "But enough." Reqata flicked him with a fingernail, scratching his arm. "Now that you're done, *I* have a project for you to work on—"

"Perhaps each of you just gets a view of what awaits on the other side," a voice drawled.

"Don't lecture me on the absolute inertia of the soul," Reqata said, disconcerted. "No one's giving our clones a free peek at eternity, Lammiela."

"Perhaps not." A long, elegant woman, Lammiela always looked the same, to everyone's distress, for she only had one body. She smiled slowly. "Or perhaps heaven is already so filled with the souls of your clones that there won't be any room for you when you finally arrive."

Reqata stood up, fury in the rise of her shoulders. Because of her past irregularities, Lammiela had an ambiguous status, and Reqata hated

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risking haut in arguing with her. Usually, Reqata couldn't help herself. "Be careful, Lammiela. You don't know anything about it." And perhaps, Elam found himself thinking, perhaps Reqata feared Death indeed.

"Oh, true enough." Lammiela sat. "Ssarna's passing has everyone on edge. I keep forgetting." Her arrival had driven the last of the connoisseurs away, and the three of them sat alone in the viewing chamber.

"You don't forget, Mother," Elam said wearily. "You do it quite on purpose."

"That's unfair, Elam." She examined him. "You look well. Dying agrees with you." She intertwined her long fingers and rested her chin on them. Her face was subtly lined, as if shaded by an engraver. Her eyes were dark blue, the same as Elam's own. "Ssarna, they say, was withered in her adytum, dry as dust. The last time I saw her, which must have been at that party on top of that miserable mountain in the Himalayas, she was a tiny slip of a girl, prepubescent. Long golden . . . *tresses.* That must be the correct word." She shook her head with weary contempt. "Though she disguised herself as young, old age found her in her most private chamber. And after old age had had his way with her, he gave her to Death. They have an arrangement."

"And the first of them is enjoying you now," Reqata said. "How soon before the exchange comes?"

Lammiela's head jerked but she did not turn. "How have you been, Elam?" She smiled at him, and he was suddenly surrounded by the smell of her perfume, as if it were a trained animal she wore around her neck and had ordered to attack. The smell was dark and spicy. It reminded him of the smell of carrion, of something dead in the hot sun, thick and insistent. He found himself holding his breath, and stood up quickly, suddenly nauseated. Nauseated, yet somehow excited. A child's feeling, the attraction of the vile, the need to touch and smell that which disgusts. Children will put anything in their mouths. He felt as if maggots were crawling under his fingernails.

"Air," Elam muttered. "I need. . . ." He walked up the striated marble stairs to the balcony above. Locked in their own conflict, neither woman followed. The warm summer air outside smelled of herbs and the dry flowers of chaparral. He clamped his teeth together and convinced himself that the flowers did not mask the smell of rotting flesh.

Sunset turned the day lavender. The view chamber's balcony hung high above the city, which flowed purposefully up the narrow valleys, leaving the dry hills bare, covered with flowers, acacia trees, and the spiky crystal plants that had evolved under some distant sun. The Mediterranean glinted far below.

Lights had come on in the city, illuminating its secret doorways. No one lived here. The Incarnate had other fashions, and the Bound were

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afraid of the ancient living cities, preferring to build their own. A Bound city could be seen burning closer to the water, its towers asserting themselves against the darkening sky. Tonight, many of the Incarnate who had witnessed Elam's performance would descend upon it for the evanescent excitements of those who lived out their lives bound to one body.

So this place was silent, save for the low resonance of bells, marking the hours for its absent dwellers. The city had been deserted for thousands of years, but was ready for someone to return. The insectoidal shapes of aircars fluttered up against the stars as Elam's audience went their separate ways.

A coppery half moon hung on the horizon, the invisible half of its face etched with colored lines and spots of flickering light. When he was young, Lammiela had told him that the Moon was inhabited by huge machines from some previous cycle of existence. The whole circle of a new moon crawled with light, an accepted feature. No one wondered at the thoughts of those intelligent machines, who looked up at the ripe blue-green planet that hung in their black sky.

"You should lie down," Lammiela said, "and rest." Her perfume was cloying and spicy. Though it did not smell even remotely of carrion, Elam still backed away, pushing himself against the railing, and let the evening breeze carry the scent away from him. Starlings swooped around the tower.

"You should get up," Reqata said, from somewhere behind her, "and run."

A blast of freezing air made him shiver. He took a step and looked down at the now hoarfrost-covered corpse in the deserted rotunda.

No Incarnate alive knew how the ancient machines worked. The corpse: was it just an image of the one in the frozen Michigan forest? Or had the rotunda's interior moved its spectators to hover over that forest in fact? Or was this body a perfect duplicate, here in the hills of Provence, of that other one? The knowledge was lost. No one knew what lay within the sphere of image. But Elam did know one thing: the cold winds of winter did not blow out of it.

Elam spotted the zeppelins about two and a half hours out of Kalgoorlie. Their colors were gaudy against the green fields and the blue Nullarbor Sea. Frost glittered on the sides away from the morning sun. Elam felt a physical joy, for the zeppelins had been caught completely by surprise. They drifted in the heavy morning air, big fat targets.

They were shuttling troops from somewhere to the North, in central Australia, to participate in one of those incomprehensible wars the Bound indulged in. Reqata had involved herself, in her capricious way, and staked haut on the outcome of the invasion of Eyre, the southern state.

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Elam could see the crewmen leaping into their tiny flyers, their wings straightening in the sun like butterflies emerging from their chrysalis, but it was too late. Their zeppelins were doomed.

Elam picked his target, communicating his choice to the other bumblebees, a few Incarnate who, amused at his constant struggle with Reqata, had joined him for the fun. The microwave signal felt like a directed whisper, save for the fact that it made his earlobes itch. He aimed for a bright green deltoid with markings that made it look like a giant spotted frog. For an instant the image took a hold of his mind, and he imagined catching a frog, grabbing it, and feeling its frightened wetness in his hand, the frantic beating of its heart. . . .

He pushed the thought away, upset at his loss of control. Timing was critical. A change in the angle of his wing stroke brought him back into position.

Elam was gorgeous. About a meter long, he had short, iridescent wings. A single long-distance optic tracked the target while two bulbous 270 degree peripherals checked the mathematical line of bumblebees to either side of him. Reqata was undoubtedly aboard one of the zeppelins, raging at the unexpected attack. The defending flyers were wide-faced black men, some odd purebred strain. Elam imagined the black Reqata, gesturing sharply as she arranged a defense. It was the quality of her movement that made her beautiful.

A steel ball whizzed past his left wing. A moment later he heard the faint tock! of the zeppelin's catapult. It took only one hit to turn a bumblebee into a stack of expensive kindling. Elam tucked one wing, tumbled, and straightened out again, coming in at his target. He unhooked his fighting legs and brought their razor edges forward.

The zeppelins were billowing, changing shape. Sudden flares disturbed Elam's infrared sensors, making him dizzy, unsure of his target. Flying the bumblebees all the way out of Kalgoorlie without any lighter-than-air support craft had been a risk. They had to knock the zeppelins to the ground and parasitize them for reactive metals. The bumblebees would be vulnerable to a ground attack as they crawled clumsily over the wreckage, but no one gained haut without taking chances. He dodged past the defending flyers, not bothering to cut them. That would only delay him.

The green frog was now below him, swelling, rippling, dropping altitude desperately. He held it in his hand where he had caught it, amid the thick rushes. The other kids were gone, somewhere, and he was alone. The frog kicked and struggled. It had voided its bowels in his hand, and he felt the wet slime. The air was hot and thick underneath the cottonwoods. Something about the frog's frantic struggle for life annoyed him. It seemed odious that something so wet and slimy would wish to remain

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alive. He laid the frog down on a flat rock and, with calm deliberation, brought another rock down on its head. Its legs kicked and kicked.

The other zeppelins seemed to have vanished. All that remained was the frog, its guts lying out in the hot sun, putrefying as he watched. Fluids dripped down the rock, staining it. He wanted to slash it apart with fire, to feel the flare as it gave up its life. The sun seared down on his shoulders.

With a sudden fury, the zeppelin turned on him. He found himself staring into its looming mouth. A hail of steel balls flew past him, and he maneuvered desperately to avoid them. He didn't understand why he had come so close without attacking.

Two balls ripped simultaneously through his right wing, sending flaring pain through the joints. He twisted down, hauling in on the almost nonfunctional muscles. If he pulled the wing in to a stable tip, he could glide downward. Green fields spiraled up at him, black houses with high-peaked roofs, colorful gardens. Pale faces peered up at him from the fields. Military vehicles had pulled up on a sandy road, the dark muzzles of their guns tracking him.

The right wing was flopping loose, sending waves of pain through his body. He veered wildly, land and sky switching position. Pulling up desperately, he angled his cutting leg and sliced off the loose part of his wing. Hot, cutting pain slashed through him.

He had finally managed to stabilize his descent, but it was too late. A field of corn floated up to meet him. For an instant, everything was agony.

"I want something primitive," Elam said, as the doctor slid a testing limb into the base of his spine. "Something prehistoric."

"All of the human past is prehistoric," Dr. Abias said. He withdrew the limb with a cold tickle, and retracted it into his body. "Your body is healthy."

Elam stood up, swinging his arms, getting used to his new proportions. His current body was lithe, gold-skinned, small-handed: designed to Reqata's specifications. She had some need of him in this form, and Elam found himself apprehensive. He had no idea if she was still angry about her defeat over Australia. "No, Abias. I mean before *any* history. Before man knew himself to be man."

"Neanderthal?" Abias murmured, hunching across the floor on his many legs. "Pithecanthropus? Australopithecus?"

"I don't know what any of those words mean," Elam said. Sometimes his servant's knowledge bothered him. What right did the Bound have to know so much when the Incarnate could dispose of their destinies so thoroughly?

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Abias turned to look back at him with his multiple oculars, brown human eyes with no face, pupils dilated. He was a machine, articulated and segmented, gleaming as if anointed with rare oils. Each of his eight moving limbs was both an arm and a leg, as if his body had been designed to work in orbit. Perhaps it had. As he had pointed out, most of the past was prehistory.

"It doesn't matter," Abias said. "I will look into it."

A Bound, Abias had been assigned to Elam by Lammiela. Punished savagely for a crime against the Incarnate, his body had been confiscated and replaced by some ancient device. Abias now ran Elam's team of cloned bodies. He was considered one of the best trainers in the Floating Game. He was so good and his loyalty so absolute that Elam had steadfastly refused to discover what crime he had committed, fearing that the knowledge would interfere in their professional relationship.

"Do that," Elam said. "I have a new project in mind." He walked across the wide, open room, feeling the sliding of unfamiliar joints. This body, a clone of his own, had been extensively modified by Abias, until there were only traces of his own nature in it. A plinth was laid with earrings, wrist and ankle bracelets, body paints, scent bottles, all supplied by Reqata. He began to put them on.

Light shone through from overhead through semicircular openings in the vault. A rough-surfaced ovoid curved up through the floor in the room's center. It was Elam's adytum, the most secret chamber where his birth body lay. After his crash in Australia, he had woken up in it for an instant, with a feeling of agony, as if every part of his body were burning. The thought still made him shudder.

An Incarnate's adytum was his most strongly guarded space, for when his real body died, he died as well. There could be no transfer of consciousness to a cloned body once the original was dead. The ancient, insolent machines that provided the ability to transfer the mind did not permit it, and since no one understood the machines, no one could do anything about it. And killing an Incarnate's birth body was the only way to truly commit murder.

Elam slid on a bracelet. "Do you know who attacked me?"

"No one has claimed responsibility," Abias answered. "Did you recognize anything of the movement?"

Elam thought about the billowing frog-like zeppelin. It hadn't been Reqata, he was sure of that. She would have made sure that he knew. But it could have been almost anyone else.

"Something went wrong in the last transfer," Elam said, embarrassed at bringing up such a private function, even to his servant. "I woke up in my adytum."

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Abias stood still, unreadable. "A terrible malfunction. I will look into it."

"Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

The party was in the hills above the city of El'lie. Water from the northern rivers poured here from holes in the rock and swirled through an elaborate maze of waterways. It finally reached one last great pool, which extended terrifyingly off the rocky slope, as if ready to tip and spill, drowning the city below it. The white rock of the pool's edge extended downward some thousands of feet, a polished sheet like the edge of the world. Far below, cataracts spilled from the pool's bottom towards the thirsty city.

Elam stood on a terrace and gazed down into the water. Reqata floated there, glistening as the afternoon sun sank over the ocean to the west. She was a strange creature, huge, all sleekly iridescent curves, blue and green, based on some creature humans had once encountered in their forgotten travels across the galaxy. She sweated color into the water, heavy swirls of bright orange and yellow sinking into the depths. Until a few hours before she had been wearing a slender, gold-skinned body like Elam's.

"They seem peaceful," she whispered, her voice echoing across the water. "But the potential for violence is extreme."

Reqata had hauled him on a preliminary tour of El'lie, site of her next art work. He remembered the fresh bodies hung in tangles of chain on a granite wall, a list of their crimes pasted on their chests; the tense market, men and women with shaved foreheads and jewels in their eyebrows, the air thick with spices; the lazy insolence of a gang of men, their faces tattooed with angry swirls, as they pushed their way through the market crowd on their way to a proscribed patriarchal religious service; the great tiled temples of the Goddesses that lined the market square.

"When will they explode?" Elam said.

"Not before the fall, when the S'tana winds blow down from the mountains. You'll really see something then." Hydraulic spines erected and sank down on her back, and she made them make a characteristic gesture, sharp and emphatic. If she was angry about what had happened in Australia, she concealed it. That frightened Elam more than open anger would have. Reqata had a habit of delayed reaction.

Reqata was an expert at exploiting obscure hostilities among the Bound, producing dramatically violent conflicts with blood spilling picturesquely down carved staircases; heads piled up in heaps, engraved ivory spheres thrust into their mouths; lines of severed hands on bronze

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poles, fingers pointing towards Heaven. That was her art. She had wanted advice. Elam had not been helpful.

Glowing lights floated above the pool, swirling in response to incomprehensible tropisms. No one knew how to control them anymore, and they moved by their own rules. A group of partyers stood on the far side of the pool, their bright-lit reflections stretching out across the glassy water.

"This water's thousands of feet deep," Reqata murmured. "The bottom's piled up with forgotten things. Boats. Gold cups. The people from the city come up here and drop things in for luck."

"Why should dropping things and forgetting about them be lucky?" Elam asked.

"I don't know. It's not always lucky to remember everything."

Elam stripped off his gown and dove into the dark water. Reqata made a bubbling sound of delight. He stroked the spines on her back, feeling them swell and deflate. He ran a cupped hand up her side. Her glowing solar sweat worked its way between his fingers and dripped down, desperate to reach its natural place somewhere in the invisible depths.

"Put on a body like this," she said. "We can swim the deep oceans and make love there, among the fish."

"Yes," he said, not meaning it. "We can."

"Elam," she said. "What happened on the balcony after we saw you die in the forest? You seemed terrified."

Elam thought, instead, of the frog. Had his memories been real? Or could Reqata have laid a trap for him? "Just a moment of nausea. Nothing."

Reqata was silent for a moment. "She hates you, you know. Lammiela. She utterly hates you."

Her tone was vicious. Here it was, vengeance for the trick he had pulled over the Nullarbor Sea. Her body shuddered, and he was suddenly conscious of how much larger than him she now was. She could squish him against the side of the pool without any difficulty. He would awake in his own chamber, in another body. Killing him was just insulting, not fatal. Perhaps it *had* been her in that frog zeppelin.

He swam slowly away from her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't. You're an expert at forgetting, at just lying down, dying, and forgetting. She hates you for what you did. For what you did to your sister!" Her voice was triumphant.

Elam felt the same searing pain he had felt when he awoke for one choking instant in his adytum. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, as he pulled himself out of the water.

"I know! That's just the problem."

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"Tell me what you mean." He kept his voice calm.

Something moved heavily in the darkness, and a row of chairs overturned with a clatter. Elam turned away from the pool. His heart pounded. A burst of laughter sounded from across the pool. The party was continuing, but the guests were impossibly far away, like a memory of childhood, unreachable and useless.

A head rose up out of the darkness, a head twice the size of Elam's body. It was a metal egg, dominated by two expressionless eyes. Behind dragged a long, multi-limbed body, shiny and obscene. Elam screamed in unreasoning and senseless terror.

The creature moved forward, swaying its head from side to side. Acid saliva drooled from beneath its crystal teeth, splashing and fizzing on the marble terrace. It was incomprehensibly ancient, something from the long-forgotten past. It swept its tail around and dragged Elam towards it.

For an instant, Elam was paralyzed, staring at the strange beauty of the dragon's teeth as they moved towards him. Then he struggled against the iron coil of the tail. His body still had traces of oil, and he slid out, stripping skin. He dove between the dragon's legs, bruising his bones on the terrace.

The dragon whipped around quickly, cornering him. With a belch, it sprayed acid over him. It burned down his shoulder, bubbling as it dissolved his skin.

"Damn you!" he shouted, and threw himself at the dragon's head. It didn't pull back quickly enough and he plunged his fist into its left eye. Its surface resisted, then popped, spraying fluid. The dragon tossed its head, flinging Elam across the ground.

He pulled himself to his feet, feeling the pain of shattered ribs. Blood dribbled down his chin. One of his legs would not support his weight. The massive head lowered down over him, muck pouring out of the destroyed eye. Elam grabbed for the other eye, but he had no strength left. Foul-smelling acid flowed over him, sloughing his flesh off with the sound of frying bacon. He stayed on his feet, trying to push imprecations between his destroyed lips. The last thing he saw was the crystal teeth, lowering towards his head.

Lammiela's house was the abode of infinity. The endless rooms were packed with the junk of a hundred worlds. The information here was irreplaceable, unduplicated anywhere else. No one came to visit, and the artifacts, data cubes, and dioramas rested in silence.

At some time in the past millennia, human beings had explored as far inward as the galactic core and so far outward that the galaxy had hung above them like a captured undersea creature, giving up its light to

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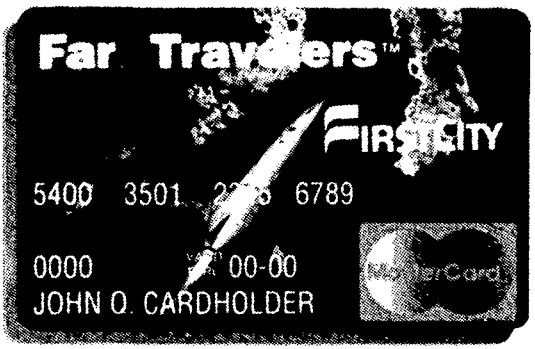
The Shape of Things to Come



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intergalactic space. They had moved through globular clusters of ancient suns and explored areas of stellar synthesis. They had raised monuments on distant planets. After some centuries of this, they had returned to Earth, built their mysterious cities on a planet that must have been nothing but old legend, and settled down, content to till the aged soil and watch the sun rise and set. And, with magnificent insouciance, they had forgotten everything, leaving their descendants ignorant.

Lammiela sat in the corner watching Elam. Her body, though elegant, was somehow bent, as if she had been cut from an oddly shaped piece of wood by a clever wood carver utilizing the limitations of his material. That was true enough, Elam reflected, examining the person who was both his parents.

When young, Lammiela had found a ship somewhere on Earth's moon, tended by the secret mechanisms that made their lives there, and gone forth to explore the old spaces. No one had any interest in following her, but somehow her exploits had gained enough attention that she had obtained extraordinary privileges.

"It's curious," she said. "Our friends the Bound have skills that we Incarnate do not even dream of, because the machines our ancestors left us have no interest in them." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "It's surprising, some of the things the Bound can do."

"Like make you both my father and my mother," Elam said.

Her face was shadowed. "Yes. There is that."

Lammiela had been born male, named Laurance. But Laurance had felt himself to be a woman. No problem for one of the Incarnate, who could be anything they wished. Laurance could have slept securely in his adytum and put female bodies on for his entire life. But Laurance did not think that way. He had gone to the Bound, and they had changed him to a woman.

"When the job was finished, I was pregnant," Lammiela said. "Laurance's sperm had fertilized my new ova. I don't know if it was a natural consequence of the rituals they used." Her muscles tightened with the memories. Tendons stood out on the backs of her hands. "They kept me conscious through it all. Pain is their price. They slew the male essence. I saw it, screaming before me. Laurance, burning."

It had cost most of her haut to do it. Dealings with the Bound inevitably involved loss of status.

"I still see him sometimes," she said.

"Who?" Elam asked.

"Your father, Laurance." Her eyes narrowed. "They didn't kill him well enough, you see. They told me they did, but he's still around." Her eyes darted, as if expecting to find Laurance hiding behind a diorama.

Elam felt a chill, a sharp feeling at the back of his neck, as if someone

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with long, long nails were stroking him there. "But you're him, Lammiela. He's not someone else."

"Do you really know so much about identity, Elam?" She sighed, relaxing. "You're right, of course. Still, was it I who stood in the Colonnade at Hrlad?" She pointed at a hologram of a long line of rock plinths, the full galaxy rising beyond them. "I'm not sure I remember it, not as if I had been there. It was legend, you know. A bedtime story. But Hrlad is real. So is Laurance. You look like him, you know. You have your father's eyes."

She stared at him coldly, and he, for the first time, thought that Reqata might have spoken truly. Perhaps his mother did indeed hate him.

"I made my choice," she said. "I can never go back. The Bound won't let me. I am a woman, and a mother."

Lammiela did not live in the city where most of the Incarnate made their home. She lived on a mountainside, bleak and alone, the rigid, curving walls of her house holding off the snow. She moved her dwelling periodically, from seashore to desert to mountain. She had no adytum, with its body, to lug with her. Elam, somehow, remembered deep forest when he was growing up, interspersed with sunny meadows. The vision wasn't clear. Nothing was clear.

After this most recent death, Elam had once again awakened in his adytum. He'd felt the fluid flowing through his lungs, and the darkness pressing down on his open eyes. Fire had burned through his veins, but there was no air to scream with. Then he had awakened again, normally, on a pallet in the light.

"Mother," he said, looking off at a broad-spectrum hologram of Sirius which spilled vicious white light across the corner of the room, too bright to look at directly without filters. "Am I truly your only child?"

Lammiela's face was still. "Most things are secrets for the first part of their existence, and forgotten thereafter. I suppose there must be a time in the middle when they are known. Who told you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. It was thrown at you as a weapon, wasn't it?"

Elam sighed. "Yes. Reqata."

"Ah, yes. I should have guessed. Dear Reqata. Does she love you, Elam?"

The question took him aback. "She says she does."

"I'm sure she means it then. I wonder what it is about you that she loves. Is that where the discussion ended then? With the question?"

"Yes. We were interrupted." Elam described the dragon's attack.

"Ah, how convenient. Reqata was always a master of timing. Who was it, do you suppose?" She looked out of the circular window at the mountain

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tundra, the land falling away to a vast ice field, just the rocky peaks of mountains thrusting through it. "No one gains haut anonymously."

"No one recognized the style. Or, if they did, they did not admit it." The scene was wrong, Elam thought. It should have been trees: smooth-trunked beeches, heavy oaks. The sun had slanted through them as if the leaves themselves generated the light.

"So why are you here, Elam? Are you looking for the tank in which that creature was grown? You may search for it if you like. Go ahead."

"No!" Elam said. "I want to find my sister." And he turned away and ran through the rooms of the house, past the endless vistas of stars that the rest of the human race had comfortably forgotten. Lammiela silently followed, effortlessly sliding through the complex displays, as Elam stumbled, now falling into an image of a kilometer-high cliff carved with human figures, now into a display of ceremonial masks with lolling tongues. He suddenly remembered running through these rooms, their spaces much larger then, pursued by a small, violent figure that left no place to hide.

In a domed room he stopped at a wall covered with racks of dark metal drawers. He pushed a spot and one slid open. Inside was a small animal, no bigger than a cat, dried as if left out in the sun. It was recognizably the dragon, curled around itself, its crystalline teeth just visible through its pulled-back lips.

Lammiela looked down at it. "You two never got along. You would have thought that you would . . . but I guess that was a foolish assumption. You tormented her with that thing, that . . . monster. It gave her screaming nightmares. Once, you propped it by her bed so that she would see it when she woke up. For three nights after that she didn't sleep." She slid the drawer shut.

"*Who was she?*" Elam demanded, taking her shoulders. She met his gaze. "It's no longer something that will just be forgotten."

She weakly raised a hand to her forehead, but Elam wasn't fooled. His mother had dealt with dangers that could have killed her a dozen times over. He tightened his grip on her shoulders. "Your sister's name was Orfea. Lovely name, don't you think? I think Laurance picked it out."

Elam could remember no sister. "Was she older or younger?"

"Neither. You were split from one ovum, identical twins. One was given an androgen bath and became you, Elam. The other was female: Orfea. God, how you grew to hate each other! It frightened me. And you were both so talented. I still have some of her essence around, I think."

"I . . . what happened to her? Where is she?"

"That was the one thing that consoled me, all these years. The fact that you didn't remember. I think that was what allowed you to survive."

"What? Tell me!"

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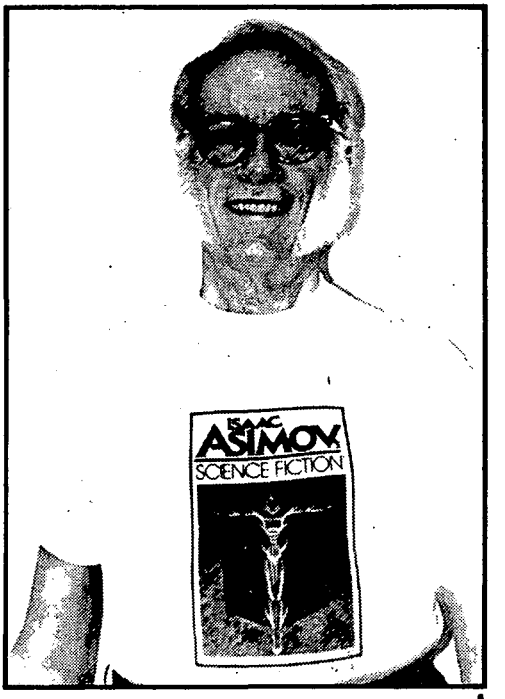

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Lammiela took only one step back, but it seemed that she receded much farther. "She was murdered. She was just a young girl. So young."

Elam looked at her, afraid of the answer. He didn't remember what had happened, and he could still see hatred in his mother's eyes. "Did they ever find out who did it?" he asked softly.

She seemed surprised by the question. "Oh, there was never any doubt. She was killed by a young friend of yours. He is now your servant. Abias."

"I have to say that it was in extremely poor taste," Reqata said, not for the first time. "Death is a fine performance, but there's no reason to perform it at a dinner party. Particularly in my presence."

She got up from the bed and stretched. This torso was wide, and well muscled. Once again, the rib cage was high, the breasts small. Elam wondered if, in the secrecy of her adytum, Reqata was male. He had never seen her in any other than a female body.

"Just out of curiosity," Elam said. "Could you tell who the dragon was?" He ran his hand over the welts on his side, marks of Reqata's fierce love.

She glanced back at him, eyelids half lowered over wide, violet eyes. She gauged if her answer would affect her haut. "Now *that* was a good trick, Elam. If I hadn't been looking right at you, I would have guessed that it was you behind those glass fangs."

She walked emphatically across the room, the slap of her bare feet echoing from the walls, and stood, challengingly, on the curve of Elam's adytum. Dawn had not yet come, and light was provided by hanging globes of a blue tint that Elam found unpleasant. He had never found a way to adjust or replace them.

"Oh Elam," she said. "If you are working on something, I approve. How you fought! You didn't want to die. You kept struggling until there was nothing left of you but bones. That dragon crunched them like candy canes." She shuddered, her face flushed. "It was wonderful."

Elam stretched and rolled out of the bed. As his weight left it, it rose off the floor, to vanish into the darkness overhead. The huge room had no other furniture.

"What do you know about my sister?" he asked.

Reqata lounged back on the adytum, curling her legs. "I know she existed, I know she's dead. More than you did, apparently." She ran her hands up her sides, cupping her breasts. "You know, the first stories I heard of you don't match you. You were more like me then. Death was your art, certainly, but it wasn't your own death."

"As you say," Elam said, stalking towards her, "I don't remember."

"How could you have forgotten?" She rested her hands on the rough

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stone of the adytum. "This is where you are, Elam. If I ripped this open, I could kill you. Really kill you. Dead."

"Want to try it?" He leaned over her. She rested back, lips parted, and dug her fingernails in a circle around his nipple.

"It could be exciting. Then I could see who you really were."

He felt the sweet bite of her nails through his skin. If he had only one body, he reflected, perhaps he could never have made love to Reqata. He couldn't have lasted.

He pushed himself forward onto her, and they made love on his adytum, above his real body as it slumbered.

Abias's kingdom was brightly lit, to Elam's surprise. He had expected a mysterious darkness. Hallways stretched in all directions, leading to chambers of silent machines and tanks filled with organs and bodies. As he stepped off the stairs, Elam realized that he had never before been down to these lower levels, even though it was as much a part of his house as any other. But this was Abias's domain. This was where the magic was done.

His bumblebee lay on a table, its dead nervous system scooped out. Dozens of tiny mechanisms crawled over it, straightening its spars, laying fragile wing material between the ribs. Elam pictured them crawling over his own body, straightening out his ribs, coring out his spinal column, resectioning his eyes.

Elam touched a panel and a prism rose up out of the floor. In it was himself, calmly asleep. Elam always kept several standard, unmodified versions of his own body ready. That was the form in which he usually died. Elam examined the face of his clone. He had never inhabited this one, and it looked strange in consequence. No emotions had ever played over those slack features, no lines of care had ever formed on the forehead or around the eyes. The face was an infant turned physically adult.

The elaborate shape of Abias appeared in a passage and made its way towards him, segmented legs gleaming. Elam felt a moment of fear. He imagined those limbs seizing his mysterious, faceless sister, Orfea, rending her, their shine dulled with her blood, sizzling smoke rising . . . he fought the images down. Abias had been a man then, if he'd been anything. He'd lost his body as a consequence of that murder.

Abias regarded him. As a Bound, and a cyborg to boot, Abias had no haut. He had no character to express, needed no gestures to show who he was. His faceless eyes were unreadable. Had he been trying to kill Elam? He had the skills and resources to have created the zeppelin, grown the dragon. But why? If he wanted to kill Elam, the real Elam, the adytum lay in his power. Those powerful limbs could rip the chamber open and drag the sleeping Elam out into the light. Elam's consciousness,

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in a clone somewhere else, wouldn't know what had happened, but would suddenly cease to exist.

"Is the new body ready?" Elam said abruptly.

Abias moved quietly away. After a moment's hesitation, Elam followed, deeper into the lower levels. They passed a prism where a baby with golden skin slept, growing towards the day that Elam could inhabit it, and witness Reqata's El'lie art work. It would replace the body destroyed by the dragon. Lying on a pallet was a short, heavy-boned body with a rounded jaw and beetle brows.

"It was a matter of genetic regression, based on the markers in the cytoplasmic mitochondria," Abias said, almost to himself. "The mitochondrial DNA is the timer, since it comes only from the female ancestor. The nucleic genetic material is completely scrambled. But much of it stretches back far enough. And of course we have stored orang and chimp genes as well. If you back and fill—"

"That's enough, Abias," Elam said impatiently. "It doesn't matter."

"No, of course not. It doesn't matter. But this is your Neanderthal."

Elam looked down at the face that was his own, a few hundred thousand years back into the past. "How long have I known you, Abias?"

"Since we were children," Abias said softly. "Don't you remember?"

"You know I don't remember. How could I have lived with you for so long otherwise? You killed my sister."

"How do you know that?"

"Lammiela told me that you killed Orfea."

"Ah," Abias said. "I didn't kill her, Elam." He paused. "You don't remember her."

"No. As far as I'm concerned, I have always been alone."

"Perhaps you always have been."

Elam considered this. "Are you claiming that Reqata and my mother are lying? That there never was an Orfea?"

Abias lowered all of his limbs until he was solid on the floor. "I think you should be more worried about who is trying to kill you. These attempts are not accidents."

"I know. Perhaps you."

"That's not even worth answering."

"But who would want to go around killing me repeatedly in my clones?"

"From the information we have now," Abias said. "It could be anyone. It could even be Orfea."

"Orfea?" Elam stared at him. "Didn't you just claim she never existed?"

"I did not. I said I didn't kill her. I didn't. Orfea did not die that day." His eyes closed and he was immobile. "Only I did."

It was a land that was familiar, but as Elam stalked it in his new body,

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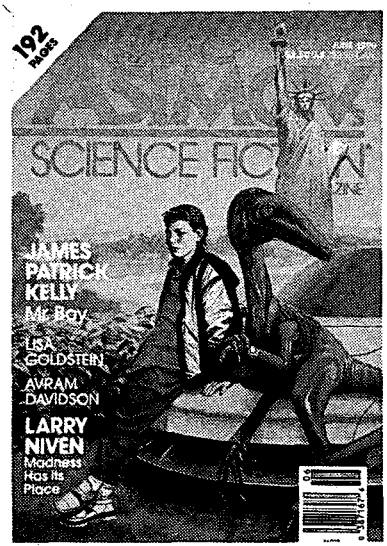

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he did not know whether it was familiar to him, Elam, or to the Neanderthal he now was. It was covered with a dark forest, broken by clearings, crossed by clear, icy streams scattered with rocks. The air was cold and damp, a living air. His body was wrapped in fur. It was not fur from an animal he had killed himself, but something Abias had mysteriously generated, in the same way he had generated the fur Elam had worn when he died in the Michigan winter. For all he knew, it was some bizarre variant of his own scalp hair.

Since this was just an exploratory journey, the creation of below-conscious reflexes, Elam retained his own memories. They sat oddly in his head. This brain perceived things more directly, seeing each beam of sunlight through the forest canopy as a separate entity, with its own characteristics and personality, owing little to the sun from which it ultimately came.

A stream had cut a deep ravine, revealing ruins. The Neanderthal wandered among the walls, which stood knee deep in the water, and peered thoughtfully at their bricks. He felt as if he were looking at the ruins of the incomprehensibly distant future, not the past at all. He imagined wading mammoths pushing their way through, knocking the walls over in their search for food. At the thought of a mammoth his hands itched to feel the haft of a spear, though he could certainly not kill such a beast by himself. He needed the help of his fellows, and they did not exist. He walked the Earth alone.

Something grunted in a pool that had once been a basement. He sloshed over to it, and gazed down at the frog. It sat on the remains of a windowsill, pulsing its throat. Elam reached down . . . and thought of the dying frog, shuddering its life out in his hand. He tied it down, limbs outspread, and played the hot cutting beam over it. It screamed and begged as the smoke from its guts rose up into the clear sky.

Elam jerked his hand back from the frog, which, startled, dove into the water and swam away. He turned and climbed the other side of the ravine. He was frightened by the savagery of the thought that had possessed him. When he pulled himself over the edge he found himself in an area of open rolling hills, the forest having retreated to the colder, northern slopes.

The past seemed closer here, as if he had indeed lived it.

He *had* hated Orfea. The feeling came to him like the memory of a shaman's rituals, fearsome and complex. It seemed that the hate had always been with him. That form, with his shape and gestures, loomed before him.

The memories were fragmentary, more terrifying than reassuring, like sharp pieces of colored glass. He saw the face of a boy he knew to be Abias, dark-eyed, curly-haired, intent. He bent over an injured animal,

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one of Elam's victims, his eyes shiny with tears. Young, he already possessed a good measure of that ancient knowledge the Bound remembered. In this case the animal was beyond healing. With a calmly dismissive gesture, Abias broke its neck.

The leaves in the forest moved of their own will, whispering to each other of the coming of the breeze, which moved its cool fingers across the back of Elam's neck.

He remembered Orfea, a slender girl with dark hair, but he never saw her clearly. Her image appeared only in reflections, side images, glimpses of an arm or a strand of hair. And he saw himself, a slender boy with dark hair, twin to Orfea. He watched himself as he tied a cat down to a piece of wood, spreading it out as it yowled. There was a fine downy hair on his back, and he could count the vertebrae as they moved under his smooth, young skin. The arm sawed with its knife and the cat screamed and spat.

The children wandered the forest, investigating what they had found in the roots of a tree. It was some sort of vast lens, mostly under the ground, with only one of its faces coming out into the air. They brushed the twigs and leaves from it and peered in, wondering at its ancient functions. Elam saw Orfea's face reflected in it, solemn eyes examining him, wondering at him. A beam of hot sunlight played on the lens, awakening lights deep within it, vague images of times and places now vanished. Midges darted in the sun, and Orfea's skin produced a smooth and heavy odor, one of the perfumes she mixed for herself: her art, as death was Elam's. Elam looked down at her hand, splayed on the smooth glass, then across at his, already rougher, stronger, with the hints of dark, dried blood around the fingernails.

Abias stood above them. He danced on the smooth glass, his callused feet slipping. He laughed every time he almost fell. "Can you see us?" he cried to the lens. "Can you see who we are? Can you see who we will become?" Elam looked up at him in wonder, then down at the boy's tiny, distorted reflection as it cavorted among the twisted trees.

The sun was suddenly hot, slicing through the trees like a burning edge. Smoke rose as it sizzled across flesh. Elam howled with pain and ran up the slope. He ran until his lungs were dying within him.

The Neanderthal stopped in a clearing up the side of a mountain. A herd of clouds moved slowly across the sky, cropping the blue grass of the overhead. Around him rocks, the old bones of the earth, came up through its sagging flesh. The trees whispered derisively below him. They talked of death and blood. "You should have died," they said. "The other should have lived." The Neanderthal turned his tear-filled eyes into the wind, though whether he wept for Orfea, or for Elam, even he could not have said.

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* * *

The city burned with a dry thunder. Elam and Reqata ran through the crowded, screaming streets with the arsonists, silent and pure men. In the shifting firelight, their tattoed faces swirled and reformed, as if made of smoke themselves.

"The situation has been balanced for years," Reqata said. "Peace conceals strong forces pushing against each other. Change their alignment, and . . ." Swords flashed in the firelight, a meaningless battle between looters and some sort of civil guard. Ahead were the tiled temples of the Goddesses, their goal.

"They feel things we don't," she said. "Religious exaltation. The suicidal depression of failed honor. Fierce loyalty to a leader. Hysterical terror at signs and portents."

Women screamed from the upper windows of a burning building, holding their children out in vain hope of salvation.

"Do you envy them?" Elam asked.

"Yes!" she cried. "To them, life is not a game." Her hand was tight on his arm. "They know who they are."

"And we don't?"

"Take me!" Reqata said fiercely. Her fingernails stabbed through his thin shirt. They had made love in countless incarnations, and these golden-skinned, slender bodies were just another to her, even with the flames rising around them.

He took her down on the stone street as the city burned around them. Her scent pooled dark. It was the smell of death and decay. He looked at her. Beneath him, eyes burning with malignant rage, was Orfea.

"You are alive," Elam cried.

Her face glowered at him. "No, you bastard," she said. "I'm not alive. You are. *You are.*"

His rage suddenly matched hers. He grabbed her hair and pulled her across the rough stone. "Yes. And I'm going to stay that way. Understand? Understand?" With each question, he slammed her head on the stone.

Her face was amused. "Really, Elam. I'm dead, remember? Dead and gone. What's the use of slamming me around?"

"You were always like that. Always sensible. Always driving me crazy!" He stopped, his hands around her throat. He looked down at her. "Why did we hate each other so much?"

"Because there was really only ever one of us. It was Lammiela who thought there were two."

Pain sliced across his cheek. Reqata slapped him again, making sure her nails bit in. Blood poured down her face and her hair was tangled. Elam stumbled back, and was shoved aside by a mob of running soldiers.

"Are you crazy?" she shouted. "You can't kill me. You can't. You'll

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ruin everything." She was hunched, he saw now, cradling her side. She reached down and unsheathed her sword. "Are you trying to go back to your old style? Try it somewhere else. This is *my* show."

"Wait," he said.

"Damn you, we'll discuss this later. In another life." The sword darted at him.

"Reqata!" he danced back, but the edge caught him across the back of his hand. "What are you—"

There were tears in her eyes as she attacked him. "I see her, you know. Don't think that I don't. I see her at night, when you are asleep. Your face is different. It's the face of a woman, Elam. A woman! Did you know that? Orfea lives on in you somewhere."

Her sword did not allow him to stop and think. She caught him again, cutting his ear. Blood soaked his shoulder. "Your perfume. Who sent it to you?"

"Don't be an idiot. Something in you is Orfea, Elam. That's the only part I really love."

He tripped over a fallen body. He rolled and tried to get to his feet. He found himself facing the point of her sword, still on his knees.

"Please, Reqata," he said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I don't want to die."

"Well, isn't that the cutest thing." Her blade pushed into his chest, cold as ice. "Why don't you figure out who you are first?"

He awoke in his adytum. His eyes generated dots of light to compensate for the complete darkness. His blood vessels burned as if filled with molten metal. He moved, pushing against the viscous fluid. Damp hair swirled around him, thick under his back, curling around his feet. It had gathered around his neck. There was no air to breathe. Elam. Where was Elam? He seemed to be gone at last, leaving only—

Elam awoke, gasping, on a pallet, still feeling the metal of Reqata's sword in his chest. So it had been her. Not satisfied with killing everyone else, she had needed to kill him as well, repeatedly. He, even now, could not understand why. Orfea.

He stood silently in the middle of the room and listened to the beating of his own heart. Only it wasn't his own, of course, not the one he had been born with. It was a heart that Abias had carefully grown in a tank somewhere below, based on information provided by a gene sample from the original Elam. The real Elam still slept peacefully in his adytum. Peacefully. . . . He had almost remembered something this time. Things had almost become clear.

He walked down to Abias's bright kingdom. Abias had tools there,

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surgical devices with sharp, deadly edges. It was his art, wasn't it? And a true artist never depended on an audience to express himself.

He searched through cabinets, tearing them open, littering the floor with sophisticated devices, hearing their delicate mechanisms shatter. He finally found a surgical tool with a vibratory blade that could cut through anything. He carried it upstairs and stared down at the ovoid of the adytum. What was inside of it? If he penetrated, perhaps, at last, he could truly see.

It wasn't the right thing, of course. The right instrument had to burn as it cut, cauterizing flesh. He remembered its bright, killing flare. This was but a poor substitute.

Metal arms pinioned him. "Not yet," Abias said softly. "You cannot do that yet."

"What do you mean?" Elam pulled himself from Abias's suddenly unresisting arms and turned to face him. The faceless eyes stared at him.

"I mean that you don't understand anything. You cannot act without finally understanding."

"Tell me, then!" Elam shouted. "Tell me what happened. I have to know. You say you didn't kill Orfea. Who did then? Did I? Did I do it?"

Abias was silent for a long time. "Yes. Your mother has, I think, tried to forgive you. But *you* are the murderer."

"You were not supposed to remember." Lammiela sat rigidly in her most private room, her mental adytum. "The Bound told me you would not. That part of you was to vanish. Just as Laurance vanished from me."

"I haven't remembered. You have to help me."

She looked at him. Until today, the hatred in her eyes would have frightened him. Now it comforted him, for he must be near the truth.

"You were a monster as a child, Elam. Evil, I would have said, though I loved you. You were Laurance, returned to punish me for having killed him . . ."

"I tortured animals," Elam said, hurrying to avoid Lammiela's past and get to his own. "I started with frogs. I moved up to cats, dogs. . . ."

"And people, Elam. You finally moved to people."

"I know," he said, thinking of the dead Orfea, who he feared he would never remember. "Abias told me."

"Abias is very forgiving," Lammiela said. "You lost him his body, and nearly his life."

"What did I do with him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, Elam. He has never said. All these years, and he has never said. You hated Orfea, and she hated you, but somehow you were still jealous of each other. She cared for Abias, your

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friend from the village, and that made you wild. He was so clever about that ancient Bound knowledge the Incarnate never pay attention to. He always tried to undo the evil that you did. He healed animals, putting them back together. Without you, he may never have learned all he did. He was a magician."

"Mother—"

She glared at him. "You strapped him down, Elam. You wanted to . . . to castrate him. Cloning you called it. You said you could clone him. He might have been able to clone you, I don't know, but you certainly could do nothing but kill him. Orfea tried to stop you, and you fought. You killed her, Elam. You took that hot cutting knife and you cut her apart. It explodes flesh, if set right, you know. There was almost nothing left."

Despite himself, Elam felt a surge of remembered pleasure.

"As you were murdering your sister, Abias freed himself. He struggled and got the tool away from you."

"But he didn't kill me."

"No. I never understood why. Instead, he mutilated you. Carefully, skillfully. He knew a lot about the human body. You were unrecognizable when they found you, all burned up, your genitals destroyed, your face a blank."

"And they punished Abias for Orfea's murder. Why?"

"He insisted that he had done it. I knew he hadn't. I finally made him tell me. The authorities didn't kill him, at my insistence. Instead, they took away his body and made him the machine he now is."

"And you made him serve me," Elam said in wonder. "All these years, you've made him serve me."

She shook her head. "No, Elam. That was his own choice. He took your body, put it in its adytum, and has served you ever since."

Elam felt hollow, spent. "You should have killed me," he whispered. "You should not have let me live."

Lammiela stared at him, her eyes bleak and cold. "I daresay you're right, Elam. You were Laurance before me, the man I can never be again. I wanted to destroy you, totally. Expunge you from existence. But it was Abias's wish that you live, and since he had suffered at your hands, I couldn't gainsay him."

"Why then?" Elam said. "Why do you want to kill me now?" He stretched his hands out towards his mother. "If you want to, do it. Do it!"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Elam. I haven't tried to kill you. I gave up thinking about that a long time ago."

He sagged. "Who then? Reqata?"

"Reqata?" Lammiela smirked. "Go through all this trouble for one

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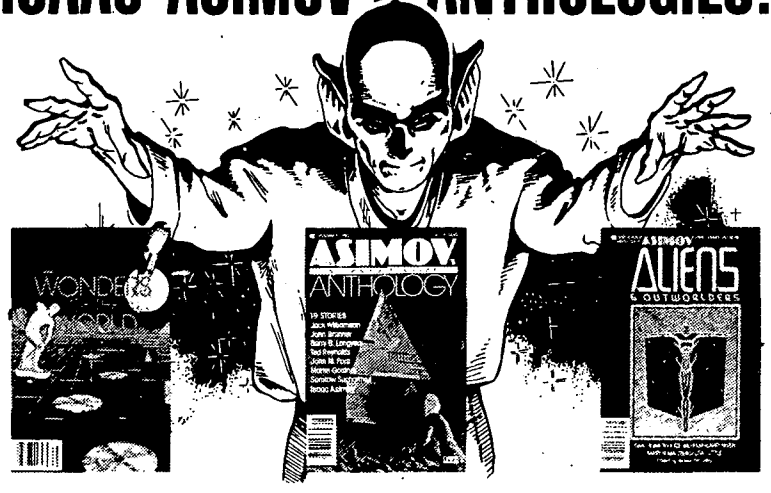

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death? It's not her style, Elam. You're not that important to her. Orfea was an artist too. Her art was scent. Scents that stick in your mind and call up past times when you smell them again."

"You wore one of them," Elam said, in sudden realization. "The day my death in the north woods ended."

"Yes," she said, her voice suddenly taut again. "Orfea wore that scent on the last day of her life, Elam. You probably remember it."

The scent brought terror with it. Elam remembered that. "Did you find some old vial of it? Whatever made you wear it?"

She looked at him, surprised. "Why, Elam. You sent it to me yourself."

Abias stood before him like a technological idol, the adytum between them.

"I'm sorry, Abias," Elam said.

"Don't be sorry," Abias said. "You gave yourself up to save me."

"Kill me, Abias," he said, not paying attention to what the cyborg had just said. "I understand everything now. I can truly die." He held the vibratory surgical tool above the adytum, ready to cut in, to kill what lay within.

"No, Elam. You don't understand everything, because what I told Lammiela that day was not the truth. I lied, and she believed me." He pushed, and a line appeared across the adytum's ovoid.

"What is the truth then, Abias?" Elam waited, almost uninterested.

"Orfea did not die that day, Elam. You did."

The adytum split open slowly.

"You did try to kill me, Elam." Abias said softly, almost reminiscently. "You strapped me down for your experiment. Orfea tried to stop you. She grabbed the hot cutting knife and fought with you. She killed you."

"I don't understand."

The interior of an adytum was dark secret. Elam peered inside, for a moment seeing nothing but yards and yards of wet, dark hair.

"Don't you understand, Orfea? Don't you know who you are?" Abias's voice was anguished. "You killed Elam, whom you hated, but it was too much for you. You mutilated yourself, horribly. And you told me what you wanted to be. I loved you. I did it."

"I wanted to be Elam," Elam whispered.

The face in the adytum was not his own. Torn and mutilated still, though repaired by Abias's skill, it was the face of Orfea. The breasts of a woman pushed up through the curling hair.

"You wanted to be the brother you had killed. After I did as you said, no one knew the difference. You were Elam. The genes were identical, since you were split from the same ovum. No one questioned what had happened. The Incarnate are squeamish, and leave such vile business

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to the Bound. And you've been gone ever since. Your hatred for who you thought you were caused you to kill yourself, over and over. Elam was alive again, and knew that Orfea had killed him. Why should he not hate her?"

"No," Elam said. "I don't hate her." He slumped down slowly to his knees, looking down at the sleeping face.

"I had to bring her back, you understand that?" Abias's voice was anguished. "If only one of you can live, why should it be Elam? Why should it be him? Orfea's spirit was awakening, slowly, after all these years. I could see it sometimes, in you."

"So you brought it forth," Elam said. "You cloned and created creatures in which her soul could exist. The zeppelin. The dragon."

"Yes."

"And each time, she was stronger. Each time I died, I awoke . . . *she* awoke for a longer time in the adytum."

"Yes!" Abias stood over him, each limb raised glittering above his head. "She will live."

Elam rested his fingers in her wet hair and stroked her cheek. She had slept a long time. Perhaps it was indeed time for him to attempt his final work of art, and die forever. Orfea would walk the earth again.

"No!" Elam shouted. "*I* will live." Abias loomed over him as the dragon had, ready to steal his life from him. He swung the vibrating blade and sliced off one of Abias's limbs. Another swung down, knocking Elam to the floor. He rolled. Abias raised himself above. Elam stabbed upwards with the blade. It penetrated the central cylinder of Abias's body and was pulled from his hands as Abias jerked back. Elam lay defenseless and awaited the ripping death from Abias's manipulator arms.

But Abias stood above him, motionless, his limbs splayed out, his eyes staring. After a long moment, Elam realized that he was never going to move again.

The adytum had shut of its own accord, its gray surface once again featureless. Elam rested his forehead against it. After all these years he had learned the truth, the truth of his past and his own identity.

Abias had made him seem an illegitimate soul, a construct of Orfea's guilt. Perhaps that was indeed all he was. He shivered against the roughness of the adytum. Orfea slumbered within it. With sudden anger, he slapped its surface. She could continue to sleep. She had killed him once. She would not have the chance to do it again.

Elam stood up wearily. He leaned on the elaborate sculpture of the dead Abias, feeling the limbs creak under his weight. What was Elam without him?

Elam was *alive*. He smiled. For the first time in his life, Elam was alive. ●

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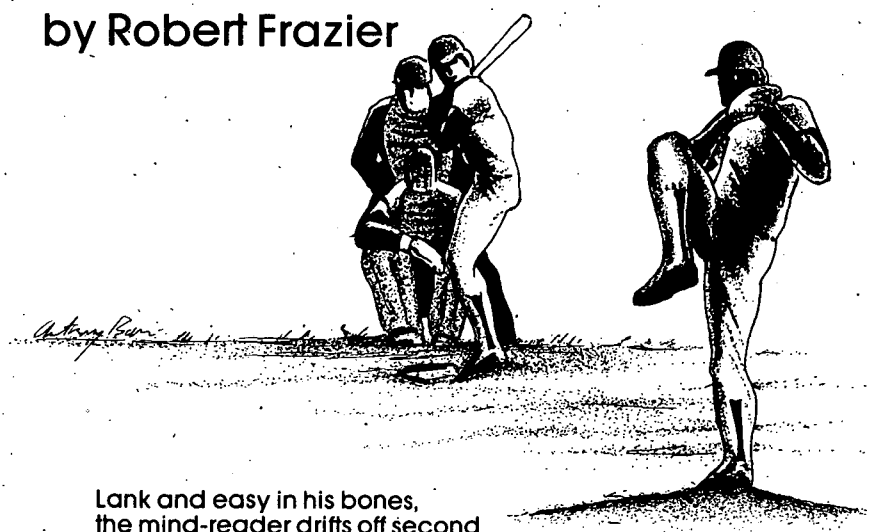
STEALING FOR THE RECORD

by Robert Frazier



Lank and easy in his bones,
the mind-reader drifts off second
and sidesteps into his lead.
One out; he's confident of his advantage.
He sets his feet, scuffs the dirt for a hold,
spreads haunches and crouches down:
knees bent, butt back, head forward.
For a moment the runner remembers another life,
sneaking comic books from the local drug store
and knowing when the soda jerk would check on him,
knowing from the color of the man's thoughts.
Now his arms seem to scissor out to bat wings,
sensing the ether for something mystical,
some plane of least resistance.
Sidestepping twice more towards third,
he lets the invisible chord that
binds him to the bag
unwind and
stretch,
and he waits to be snapped back in a blur.

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As he's poised on an exact balance point,
animal hunger rises in the runner's throat
along with the acids of tension and gut fear.
His mind darts toward home, toward the dugout,
toward the coach's head at third.
Back to the fastball hurler.
The power of concentration burns
through his veins like a hundred dollar poison,
glows in white rings around his irises.
The shortstop adjusts.
He reads them again to assure himself
that all systems are green.
He awaits cryptic signs.

The pitcher begins his move,
commits in his mind
to make the pitch toward home plate.
The runner pivots and digs and accelerates
until his legs churn like eggbeaters,
making the clods of dirt spit behind him.
Time seems to balloon out like those seconds
when a driver loses control of a speeding car,
when he sees his life narrowed before him
into a long shining tunnel.
The slide is smooth, almost unnecessary.
The throw is on the button, but way late.
He rises easily to brush off while
tides of inertia shift in his plumbing.
Perhaps the cheers rise above him like startled birds.
Perhaps the benches will empty when
a long fly sends him in.
Perhaps memories of super heroes
warm his head
with legend.

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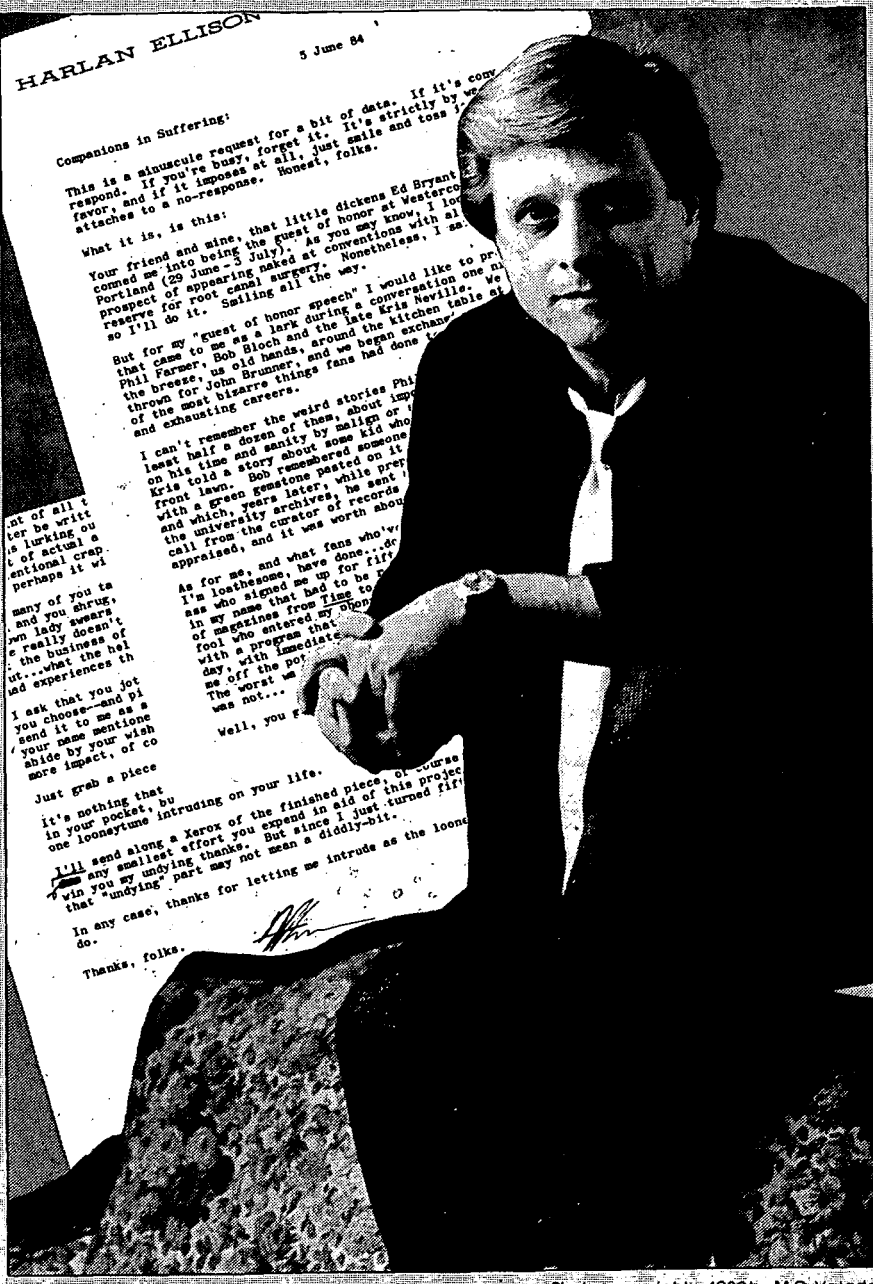
HARLAN ELLISON
5 June 84
Compañions in Suffering:
This is a minuscule request for a bit of data. If it's
respond. If you're busy, forget it. It's strictly by
favor, and if it imposes at all, just smile and toss
attaches to a no-response. Honest, folks.
What it is, is this:
Your friend and mine, that little dickens Ed Bryant
conned me into being the guest of honor at Westercon
Portland (29 June-3 July). As you may know, I
prospect of appearing naked at conventions with
reserve for root canal surgery. Nonetheless, I
so I'll do it. Smiling all the way.
But for my "guest of honor speech" I would like to
that came to me as a lark during a conversation one
Phil Farmer, Bob Bloch and the late Kris Neville.
the breeze, us old hands, around the kitchen table
thrown for John Brunner, and we began exchan
of the most bizarre things fans had done
and exhausting careers.
I can't remember the weird stories Phi
least half a dozen of them, about imp
on his time and sanity by malign or
Kris told a story about some kid who
front lawn. Bob remembered someone pasted on it
with a green gemstone pasted on it
and which, years later, while pre
the university archives, he sant
call from the curator of records
appraised, and it was worth abou
As for me, and what fans who'v
I'm loathesome, have done...d
ass who signed me up for fift
in my name that had to be
of magazines from Time to
fool who entered my
with a program that
day, with immediat
me off the po
The worst
was not...
Well, you
at of all t
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perhaps it wi
many of you ta
, and you shrug,
wn lady swears
e really doesn't
the business of
ut...what the hel
nd experiences th
I ask that you jot
you choose--and pi
send it to me as a
your name mentione
abide by your wish
more impact, of co
Just grab a piece
It's nothing that
in your pocket, bu
one looneytune intruding on your life.
I'll send along a Xerox of the finished piece, of course
any smallest effort you expend in aid of this projec
win you my undying thanks. But since I just turned fif
that "undying" part may not mean a diddly-bit.
In any case, thanks for letting me intrude as the loon
do.
Thanks, folks.

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XENOGENESIS

by Harlan Ellison

Much of this essay has been excerpted from letters solicited by the author specifically for this purpose. The editor of this magazine vouches for the authenticity of these letters, and further attests he has seen them in their original forms.

—Gardner Dozois

The front door of my home is beautiful beyond the describing of it. Created for me many years ago by two fine sculptors, Mabel and Milon Hutchinson, whose work equals in style and gorgeousness the finest woodworking of Louise Nevelson, it is a construct of "found" woodblocks and assorted other pieces. Mabel is quite, quite old now, but she still lives, tended by some of her most loving students, in Capistrano Beach, California. Milon died in 1977, leaving Mabel alone after fifty years of love. He was seventy-two when he passed over. I admired and loved them both, and the beauty they brought to my life and my home never dims.

One Friday night in 1979, I appeared on a radio show well-known in Los Angeles: *Hour 25,* hosted by Mike Hodel. It's a science fiction program that covers film and television as well as print mediums, and on that evening in 1979 I gave my opinion of the first *Star Trek* movie, which I had seen the night before. It didn't deserve much kindness, that film, and I was not very kind in my remarks.*

*Those of you who have read the introduction to my most recent collection of stories, *Angry Candy,* know that Mike Hodel died in May of 1986, little more than two years after I delivered this essay as the Guest of Honor speech at the 37th annual West Coast Science Fantasy Conference ("Westercon 37") in Portland, Oregon, 1 July 1984. He had recently celebrated his fifteenth consecutive year as host of *Hour 25.* As he lay dying in Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, Mike asked me to take over the show, to keep it going even though he wasn't there to continue at the controls. We had co-hosted the show on 14 March 1986, just before

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After the show, and after Mike and I had gone for our usual pie, coffee and chat at DuPar's, I came home around one o'clock. It was dark in the entranceway to my home, and I unlocked the beautiful door Mabel and Milon had made for me, entered the house, and closed the door. I went to bed.

Next day was a Saturday, and unusual for my secretary to come in, but she had something to finish, and when she showed up at ten o'clock, she said, "What happened to the front door?"

With a soft, nasty melting feeling in my chest, I went to the front door and opened it.

In the night, probably while I was still at the radio station, someone had thrown several dozen eggs on that work of art. It took many days to clean off the mess, from the hundreds of surfaces and interstitial crevices. I could not concentrate on writing while the door was wounded. I picked and scoured and worked at it with toothbrushes and polish till the day grew dark. Finally, it came as clean as I could get it, but the egg had dried overnight and today the door remains discolored in some places, scored in others where my cleaning marred the surfaces.

Every time I unlock my front door, I hope that if Mabel comes to visit, it will be at night. For her, in the last years of her life, the art that she and Milon produced is solitary balm for her loss. I could not bear to see her expression if she were to see the ravages done to that important bit of her past. I think of the pithecanthropoid fan who slung those eggs, and I also hope I never find out which one it was.

My friend James Blish died in 1975.

Here is an extract from a letter I wrote to M. John Harrison—Mike Harrison, the brilliant English author of the Virconium novels—on July 31st of that year:

> Dear Mike:
>
> By now, of course, you know Jim passed away. I was planning to fly to England to see him. I'd been meaning to do it for almost a year but the usual nonsense work-load and deadlines and personal bullshit prevented the journey. I'd decided I was coming early in August, but when I wrote Jim and Judy, and then followed it up with a phone call earlier this month, Judy told me August might be too late.
>
> I'd dedicated a new book to

he went into the hospital, and on 4 April I became the host, renaming the show *Mike Hodel's Hour 25.* I stayed at the task for sixty installments, every Friday night through 19 June 1987. At the end of my run the show was passed into the capable hands of J. Michael Straczynski, and Joe has kept the show alive from that time till present, every Friday-night, 10-12:00 midnight in Los Angeles, on KPFK-FM, 90.7 on the dial. Mike Hodel lives on in memory and, ironically, only a few months ago Joe Straczynski played the audiocassette of this speech, as delivered in 1984 in Portland, on *Hour 25,* thereby renewing interest in the material being updated and published here.

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him. I sent him a copy of the dedication page. He wrote me back about two weeks ago . . . maybe the last thing he ever did write . . . I don't know . . . and he was so damned tough, so bloody *Jim,* as he'd always been, saying he was feeling better and he was delighted I was, at last, coming to visit; that I should stay on a long while and we'd catch up on the past few years during which we hadn't seen or communicated with each other too much. He was thrilled with the dedication to *Shatterday,* and he not only signed my personal copy of *Again, Dangerous Visions* that I'd packed up and sent, but he'd been thoughtful enough to get it signed by Josephine Saxton—there on a weekend visit—thereby saving me another transatlantic shipping. Even at the last, in pain, and having difficulty writing, he'd been capable of one more act of friendship and concern: something that had always been his hallmark.

But now he's gone. And I missed the final appointment. The long and endlessly fascinating conversation Jim Blish held with the world is ended, and I miss him terribly.

Mike replied, and like so many others that dark Autumn, he wanted to share his sorrow at Jim's death. I wrote him in response on August 12th:

Thanks for the note. I appreciate your words. (How odd: Judy Blish actually sustains the loss, and here we are, getting strokes on the passing of Jim. What miserable little creatures we are, wallowing in other people's sorrow just to enable us to tolerate our pain.)

I'd thought I had it all contained, and today Judy's letter came and she said, "Jim loved you. He always said so," and I fell apart again. I'm not a sentimental type, god knows, but there is some part of me that feels an inconsolable loss at the going of that dear man who taught me so much. Christ, it's awful.

Within three weeks of my sending that letter to Mike Harrison, I received from New York the most recent (at that time) of a series of hate letters from an unsigned correspondent who had been poisoning my mailbox with his vicious notes for almost two years. His note read, in part:

I understand James Blish died. You know he was a publicity flack for the tobacco industry for many years and I understand he died of cancer of the throat. That's real poetic justice, don't you think? One more of you phonies down, pretty soon it will be your turn.

For years I did not know who was behind those letters sans name or address, except that they were all postmarked out of New York City and they were obviously from

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someone who was very familiar with science fiction and fandom, someone who knew what I was doing on a continuing basis, and someone who probably subscribed to *Locus*.

For years I saved all the letters, in a file labeled "Mr. X." Then one day in late 1983, it chanced that a piece of mail addressed to The Harlan Ellison Record Collection was shown to me by the then-Director of The Collection, Shelley Levinson. I forget now why she showed me that note, as I seldom see correspondence sent to that arm of The Kilimanjaro Corporation. But when I began reading the letter, I could not see the words, I could see only the typewriter face that suddenly I recognized from protracted and intense scrutiny of Mr. X's vile communiques. Peculiarities of some of the letters as they'd been typed seemed familiar. I rushed upstairs to my office and pulled the file. Yes, the "t" had a broken cross-bar; the "q" had a loop filled with gunk that reproduced solid black; the "r" on the machine had settled, appearing slightly below the level of all the other letters.

I checked the membership roster of The Collection and found that Mr. X—whose identity had been sedulously disguised for ten years—was Norman E[redacted], who lived at [redacted] Street in New York. His phone number was [redacted].* He had been one of the earliest members of The Collection, and had received every newsletter issued by The Collection. Records of purchases showed he had bought first editions of my books at inflated prices.

I called him. Late one night. Very late one night.

"Mr. E[redacted]?"

A sleepy, querulous "Yes?"

"This is Harlan Ellison, Mr. E[redacted]."

A worried, startled, "Uh . . ."

"For a long time now you've been having fun with me, haven't you, Mr. E[redacted]?"

A slow, reluctant "I guess so."

"Well, that was because you knew where *I* was, and who I am; but now I know who *you* are, and *where* you are. Now I start having some fun with you, Mr. E[redacted]. And as nasty as your sense of humor is, mine is plain downright ugly. I'm a winner, Norman, and nothing is beneath me to make the other guy lose. *You're* the other guy, Norman. You'll be hearing from me. Not immediately, but soon. Soon, Norman. I look forward to it."

He began babbling, trying to tell me it was all a gag, that he meant no harm. But I had the dozens and dozens of his wretched little notes in front of me, the ones that defamed Phil Farmer and Damon Knight and other of my friends. I was easily able to dip down into the well of memory and bring back the anxiety and frustration I'd felt each day one of those unmarked envelopes appeared in the mail. The

*Material has been deleted at the request of the editor to avoid any possible legal complications.

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fury of not being able to respond! His cowardly anonymity! I hung up on him. I never learned his motivation for spending so much time and nastiness harassing me.

Norman E[redacted] has changed his phone number.

He's done it several times.

Do you have any idea how easy it is to ferret out a new, unlisted number, particularly if you represent yourself to Nynex, the New York Telephone Company, as Detective-Lieutenant Hemphill of the Los Angeles Police Department?

When I sat down to write this article on June 6th, 1984, I had not heard from Norman E[redacted] for the many months since I'd spoken to him, very late that night. As I finished typing the preceding paragraph, the mail arrived. I went downstairs and brought it in. Atop the stack, a mere five minutes ago (as I sat writing *this* paragraph), was a postcard—without return address, postmarked New York—that read as follows

> Harlan, I liked "Stalking the Nightmare" very much. Keep writing. Best wishes,
>
> Norman E[redacted]

With charming familiarity, he has signed it "Norman."

Have you ever noticed how few people in this life know what's good for them?

Soon, Norman. I look forward to it.

* * *

In biology there is a phenomenon known as xenogenesis. It is a pathological state in which the child does not resemble the parent. You may remember a fairly grisly 1975 film by my pal Larry Cohen titled *It's Alive!* in which a fanged and taloned baby gnaws its way out of its mother's womb and slaughters the attending nurses and gynecologist in the delivery room and then leaps straight up through a skylight, smashes out, and for the duration of the film crawls in and out of the frame ripping people's throats. Its natural father is a CPA or something similar. Most CPA's do not, other than symbolically, have fangs and talons. Xenogenesis.

In the subculture of science fiction literature and its umbilically attached aficionados, we have the manifestation of a symbiotic relationship in which the behavior of the children, that is, the fans, does not resemble the noble ideals set forth in the writings and pronouncements of the parents, the writers. For all its apocalyptic doomsaying, its frequent pointing with alarm, its gardyloos of caution, the literature of imagination has ever and always promoted an ethic of good manners and kindness via its viewpoint characters. The ones we are asked to relate to, in sf and fantasy, the ones we are urged to see as the Good Folks, are usually the ones who say excuse me and thank you, ma'am.

The most efficient narrative shorthand to explain why a partic-

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ular character is the one struck by cosmic lightning or masticated by some nameless Lovecraftian horror is to paint that character as rude, insensitive, paralogical or slovenly.

Through this free-floating auctorial trope, the canon has promulgated as salutary an image of mannerliness, rectitude and humanism. The smart alecks, slugs, slimeworts and snipers of the universe in these fables unfailingly reap a terrible comeuppance.

That is the attitude of the parents, for the most part.

Yet the children of this ongoing education, the fans who incorporate the canon as a significant part of their world-view, frequently demonstrate a cruelty that would, in the fiction, bring them a reward of Job-like awfulness.

One demur, herewith offered, but doomed to be ignored or misinterpreted: *not all fans are malevolent.* Let me repeat: there are many wonderful fans. Kindness, courtesy and self-sacrifice are as frequent, as common, among fans as flowers in the spring. In more than thirty years of linkage with sf and its fandom, I have made friends whose decency and support have made life infinitely more tenable. Casual generosities and life-saving assistance have ever been available to me, not only from those I know well, but through the good offices of readers I've never met, random acquaintances at conventions, passersby who saw an opportunity for largesse and leaped at the chance to be of aid. What I say here will, please note, exclude all the Good Guys. They know who they are. I'll say it a third time, and hope the message gets through: I speak here not of *all* fans!

The ones who will produce static at this essay are the ones whose consciences chew on them. The ones who will pillory the messenger serve their own secret agenda. They feel guilty, so they will try to behead the messenger. Nonetheless, what we deal with in this tract are the ones known to us all . . . the rude, the vicious, the stunned and the insensitive. And they *don't* know who they are, because the very meanspiritedness and playground bully cruelty that marks them also poisons them with an arrogance that prevents their perceiving how vile they are to the rest of us, how embarrassing they are to the preponderance of decent and gracious men and women who make up the literary support-group we call fandom.

What you will confront in these pages is the colony of grubs that has already driven too many writers and artists from the company of the rest of us; the maggots whose random and irrational gaffes have compelled those we come to conventions to meet, to say, "No more. I can't face another weekend with those creeps!" (Or haven't you wondered why you never see Stephen King at conventions these days?)

They are the result of xenoge-

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nesis. They are the ones who yell *Jump!* at the damned soul on the ledge. They are the meaning of arrested adolescence. They are the canker on your rose, the worm in your apple. And the rest of you, the fans and readers, have to stand the gaff for their leprous behavior. And here is the litany.

One fan who was invited into my home stole more than two thousand dollars' worth of rare comic books during a period of more than six months of friendly visits. Another fan walked off with the virtually irreplaceable Shasta Press books that bear Hannes Bok covers, all of them in mint condition, all of them bearing my bookplates. Yet another fan I caught as she walked out the front door of my house, with the first three issues of *Unknown* in her tote bag. And there was one who pocketed as memento of his visit, a collectible pinback button from the old Kellogg's Pep cereal series of comic book characters, Annie's dog Sandy. Another relieved me of the worry of winding a wristwatch sent to me by an executive of the Bulova company; an instrument produced in the number of two: one I owned, the other belonging to Winston Churchill. Another took a leisurely riffle through my files in the dead of night while the rest of the household was asleep, and got away with a series of original letters from the author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,* B. Traven, as well as the carbons of my letters to him in Mexico. And still another managed to cop—one by one, under his shirt—several dozen first editions that I'd bought new in the mid-fifties, when I'd been a fan myself, and had started collecting, paying for the books by saving lunch money. At the Kansas City Worldcon a number of years ago, a fan who still comes to conventions showed up at a party in my room and stole the only Virgil Finlay artwork I've ever been able to find for a reasonable purchase price.

These are not isolated instances of theft so casually performed that the question of morality never occurs to the footpad. If you want to hear other such tales, speak to Forrest J. Ackerman, whose home has been robbed again and again by young fans he's been kind enough to show through his vast collection. Or speak to Lydia Marano of the Dangerous Visions Bookstore in Sherman Oaks, California, or Sherry Gottlieb of A Change of Hobbit in Santa Monica, or *any* dealer or bookstore owner at any convention you ever attend.

I didn't know slans had such taking ways.

A fan from the Seattle area pulled the subscription coupons from more than fifty magazines ranging from *Good Housekeeping* to *Hustler,* typed in my name and address, and signed me up for subscriptions. Have you ever tried to get *Time* magazine to stop sending you its

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journal, and billing you endlessly? Have you ever received twelve dunning letters from bill collection agencies for goods you never requested, all in one day? Have you ever considered how much time and money you expend calling computerized subscription services in Colorado, trying to get them to trace where bogus subscription coupons came from?

And the ugliness of that fan's nature reveals itself in an additional little twist put on the scam. Each subscription was made in the name of *another* science fiction professional . . . Isaac Asimov or Stephen King or . . . well, here, take a look at this bogus gift subscription returned to me by the *National Review* fulfillment department:

Thus, each stone bruises at least two of us. Casual, sidebar wickedness; and the creep thinks it's cute. The subscription was sent to an approximation of my address, to "Helen Arlison." Yeah . . . cute.

But the prank went further: the fan also ordered a raft of expensive art items from The Franklin Mint, signed me up for The Columbia Tape Club, for whole series of porcelain figurines and vases from The Collectors' Society, for albums of country and western golden oldies, for junk mail addressed to pet shops, for catalogues of clothing, women's lingerie, computer supplies, yachting equipment, farm implements. In one week I received six Slim Whitman albums. In the space of one year I had to hire an assistant at considerable cost, just to handle the cornucopial flow of magazines, catalogues, unordered product, retail credit demands and time-wasting problems this single fan visited on me.

I am not alone in suffering thus. This has happened to almost every writer I've queried. They have asked

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me not to use their names. Monkey-see, monkey-do: they're afraid a few of you might not yet have had this perverted behavior occur to you, that once you learn of it, you'll do it to them.

And each company that received my name sold the name and the address to a dozen *other* mail order companies whose unsolicited junk mail jammed my mailbox every day. I came to dread the arrival of the postal truck.

There was the fool who signed me up for every book club in America, from the Literary Guild to the Time-Life Library of World War II. We had stacks of unordered books to return every day for six months. Consider the packing, the trips to the post office. Consider what happens to one's writing schedule!

There was the jerk who registered me for lonely hearts clubs, organizations that supply the names of Oriental women who want to become American brides, computer dating firms, pen pal associations, porn photo outfits that run ads that say, "Hi, I'm Rhonda, and if you'd like to see candid, full-front shots of me and my friend Roxanne, doing what we like to do best, just send us fifteen dollars and your special wants; we'll do the rest."

There was the monster who anonymously called the police when I was living in New York in 1960, and told them I had an apartment filled with drugs and weapons, and on a quiet day recorded in my book *Memos from Purgatory,* I was arrested and taken off to the Manhattan holding tanks called the Tombs, and though there wasn't so much as a NoDoz tablet in my apartment, I was arraigned and had to go before the grand jury.

Amusing. All terribly amusing. Each little high school prank a giggle. And how many hours spent cleaning up these unnecessary contretemps might have been spent producing more stories? How many hours wasted, how many books lost, unwritten? Now multiply what has happened to me, the hours lost, by the number of writers who've had this kind of crap pulled on them, too. A writer has only talent, a finite amount of visceral material, and a little time . . . never enough time. Amusing.

They are cowardly little scum, these brain-damage cases who demean honest fans by calling themselves aficionados of the literature of imagination. They spread the gossip behind your back, they make the snide remarks as they zip past you in the convention halls, they put no return address on the vile letters, they make up false names when they write the hate letters to the magazines that run your stories, they use the telephone. For them, courage and rational behavior are alien concepts only to be read about in slambang space operas. Such concepts do not impinge upon their miserable lives in the real world.

This essay came into being one

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evening at a reception given for John Brunner during one of his visits to Los Angeles. At that gathering, I found myself sitting at a kitchen table with Robert Bloch, Philip José Farmer and the late Kris Neville. We were discussing what had happened to me the night before.

I had only recently, at that time, begun living with a woman I'd met in Boston. She had come out to L.A. to stay with me, and we had gone to see the Woody Allen film *Stardust Memories*. In one scene of the movie, Woody, playing himself in the role of a world-famous comedy director, attends one of those film weekends held all-too-frequently at resort hotels in the Poconos. He is swamped by pushy, impertinent, gauche and sycophantic fans of his work. They chivvy and harass him; and at one point a woman stridently demands he autograph her hand. When he refuses she gets insulting.

I leaned over to whisper to my new friend from Boston, "That's my life you're looking at."

She laughed at me, and later, when we had left the theater, she accused me of unjustified self-importance and advised me that even though she was from Boston, she hadn't fallen off the turnip truck the day before. I smiled and said no more.

Two nights later, on the Friday before the reception for John Brunner, I had to speak at a fund-raising event for imprisoned writers in Latin American nations, sponsored by P.E.N., the international journalism society, and as we sat in the front row waiting for the event to begin, a stout woman behind us gave a hoot, clamped a paw on my shoulder, and demanded, "Are you Harlan Ellison?"

I turned with fear, saw this behemoth apparition, and acknowledged reluctantly that I was, indeed, that doomed soul. My new friend from Boston also turned, her eyes wide, as the woman proclaimed, with the rustic charm of a farmhand calling in the hogs, "I've read everything you've ever written! I love your stuff! Here, sign my breast!" And she wrenched aside her ruffled top to expose a mammary the size and richness of Latvia. My lady friend stared with horror, then looked at me and blurted, "Jeeeeezus, you weren't kidding, were you?"

I was discussing this not-uncommon event with Kris and Phil and Bob, at John's reception, and in fun we began telling each other of the horror scenes we'd gone through with fans.

Kris Neville regaled us with a story of pyramiding impositions by a young male fan who had come to pay homage, culminating in his taking up residence on Kris and Lil's front lawn until they were forced to call the juvenile authorities.

Bob's most bizarre fan story involved the receipt, one day in the mail, of a birthday card from an

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unknown enthusiast who had attached to the felicitation, a green gemstone. Bob tossed the card with rock attached, into a junk drawer. Years later, when the drawer's contents were sent to one of the university archives that preserve the papers of famous writers, Bob received a call from the curator who advised him that they'd had the stone appraised, and it was valued at seven thousand dollars.

On the day I sat down to write this essay, June 6th, 1984, apart from the E[redacted] postcard mentioned earlier, and hundreds of other items of postal wonderfulness, I received a letter from one Leroy Jones of Philadelphia. His request was not unlike hundreds of other similar missives I receive in a year. It was as follows, and I quote directly from the scrawled note before me:

> Dear Mr. Ellison—
> I collect quotes of authors (*sic*) works. Could you please pen a few dozen quotes from your work on the enclosed cards? I'm only 16 so have not read too much on you. I'm not sure I'd like all you write but I know you've done a movie *The Oscar* & I saw that. I need some quotes.
> Thanks—Leroy.

When I saw that note, with its casual impertinences and its gratuitous rudeness and its utter lack of understanding of the value of time to a writer, I thought, *I can't be the* only *poor devil who gets this lunacy every day.* I can't be!

And I remembered the conversation with Kris and Phil and Bob, and I put together a letter that I Xeroxed and sent off to eighty-five writers and artists of my acquaintance. The letter was an imposition precisely of the kind I despise most, and so I made it very clear passim the copy that this was a lark, a frippery, an amusement, and if it interfered with the recipient's writing in even the smallest way, it was to be ignored.

I thought perhaps I'd get one or two responses from my closest friends, maybe Silverberg and David Gerrold, maybe Ed Bryant and Vonda McIntyre. What I did not expect was the instantaneous tidal wave, the floodrush, the *tsunami* of responses from people I hadn't heard from in years, each one recounting a horror more unbelievable than the one preceding.

I will recount some of them here. Most have the name of the victims attached. A few, of the most horrible, do not: the true and actual anguish that came from these incidents remains, and I have been asked by the tellers of these tales not to specify into whose lives this shitrain fell.

One more interesting sidebar.

Almost without exception, every letter begins, as does, say, Isaac Asimov's response: "Dear Harlan, In general, my readers are a very nice bunch of people who virtually never impose," and then *every single one of them* goes on, in the sec-

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ond paragraph, to say, "However, there was this *one* fan who . . ." and then proceeds to recount a monstrous invasion of privacy or gratuitous bit of ugliness that makes the back teeth itch.

It is as if the writers in this genre, hedging their bets in the unlikely event fandom rises like the followers of Madame DeFarge in the streets of Paris, have prefaced their true feelings with a disclaimer that will save them from the guillotine. Have no fear, friends, the letters will go with me to my grave. Soon after the publication of this essay, most likely.

And here are the stories, so that those who suggest—as did Donald Kingsbury in his communique with the words "Each of our Karmas is very different. As L. Ron Hubbard used to say, 'We create what we expect.' Have a happy root canal job"—wilfulness on the part of Ellison puts him solely and alone in the path of such vile behavior, will have evidence that this is a plague that touches all of us, sweetheart or monster.

Here are the faces of the demons we deal with:

We'll begin slowly. The first response was from the late "James Tiptree, Jr."—Alice Sheldon—who, because of her government security clearance, maintained pseudonymous anonymity as a matter of serious consequence. Alli wrote me, "Harlan, love . . . Lovely idea, the egregious fan examples. I've combed memory and nothing comes up. The problem is that for years I was insulated and little happened except the 3-day stakeout of my post office box when the WorldCon was in Baltimore . . ."

Here's one from James Gunn, professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. A very quiet and pleasant man, a *gentle* and *courteous* man. "Dear Harlan, I must not arouse the same passions in fans as some of my colleagues. Oh, I've had people send me books and gummed stickers to sign, and one . . . wrote me sycophantic letters from a Florida jail and eventually wound up asking me for a thousand dollars for his legal defense . . . but the only incident that I found myself marveling at was the young woman who passed me at the 'meet-the-authors reception' at the WorldCon in Baltimore, squinted at my name tag, and said indignantly, 'I never heard of you.' All I could do was stare."

Barry Malzberg could do *weeks* of horror stories, angst incarnate. But here's what he wrote: "Harlan, I think it's a bad idea altogether, this topic of Great Fan Lunacies Me and My Colleagues Have Known, because this only encourages the troops, stirs them up, like one political disaster has been known to trigger another. The 95% who cannot conceive of being similarly loathsome will laugh and applaud and enjoy and see trivialized real pain, and the other 5% will be taking notes."

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In the process of bringing this manuscript up to date, after five years, it was suggested by one editor that perhaps I should drop the anecdote of the "seven thousand dollar gemstone" as Robert Bloch reported it, because it redounded to Bloch's benefit. Well, yes, I could have dropped that story; but the intent of this piece is to show the reality, not a carefully manipulated special-pleading slant on that reality. I submit, nonetheless, that anyone crazy enough to send a rock like that, casually, without advising anyone of its value, is a looneytune by any analysis, and might as easily do something dangerous or inconvenient the next time out . . . or heaven forbid the object of such a person's admiration should rebuff the attentions! But that wasn't even what Bob Bloch chose as his most outstanding fan horror story. Here's what he wrote:

> Dear Harlan: You know the old saying, "Once bitten, twice shy?" Well, I got a new one for you. "Three times bitten; what a dummy!"
>
> A fan I'd known for thirty years kept pestering me to do a collection of my old Lefty Feep stories. Finally he said he'd go into specialty publishing and do the book himself—all I had to do was choose the yarns and write an introduction. My former agent agreed, so I went to work. After a year of unanswered letters I finally caught up with this joker at a convention and pinned him to the wall. "Hey, I forgot to tell you," he said. "I decided to put out somebody else's collection instead."*
>
> A second fan proposed to put out a new collection of my fanzine pieces as a sequel to *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*. Since he was already heavily into specialty publishing I saw no harm in the idea and, as requested, went over my material, selected the best, and prepared an introduction. Unlike the first yo-yo, this one did reply to my letters, but never took any action. Eighteen months later I managed to pry my material back from him.
>
> The third fan was on the committee of a convention where I was scheduled to be guest of honor—after they found out Jules Verne was dead. This turkey wanted to do a volume of my hitherto-unreprinted stories, both as a convention special and for subsequent sale through a publishing outlet. In this case I needn't wait a year or a year and a half—time was of the essence and he needed my choice of stories plus introductions to same. I rushed the stuff out to him and within two months

*Bloch wrote that in June of 1984. In 1987 a new specialty publisher called Creatures at Large (sited in Pacifica, Cal.) run by John Stanley published the first of a proposed trilogy of Bloch collections, *Lost In Time and Space with Lefty Feep*. Stanley is *not* the party referred to in Bloch's letter. But Bloch, when contacted about this, said that if he had a *fourth* horror anecdote to relate, he'd use the Stanley publication of the first volume of Feep stories. Apparently there will be no second and third volumes.

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—right in time for the convention!—he called to tell me he'd changed his mind and there wasn't any book.

I am not releasing the name of the first fan, because he's dead.

And I'm not releasing the names of the other two fans, because I just might kill them yet.

I selected dear Alli Sheldon, gentlemanly Jim Gunn, and the ever-fan-helpful Bob Bloch as the first three invokers of the litany, for a reason. I mentioned earlier that Donald Kingsbury's letter suggested we bring such iniquity upon ourselves by having sodden karma. His letter glowed with the wonderful experiences he's had at conventions. Apparently, the only thing dismaying ever to have involved him was this:

"Once I was sitting forlornly at an autograph table all alone because everyone was lined up for Asimov and Ellison, and a sweet young thing who felt sorry for me ran out and bought a book by me, even though she didn't know me from Adam, just so I'd have at least one customer." And then Don finished off the note—as I mentioned earlier—with this: "Each of our Karmas is very different. As L. Ron Hubbard used to say, 'We create what we expect.' Have a happy root canal job."

I expected a bit of that. Because I have chosen to suffer this kind of behavior not at all, mythology has grown that I am rude, meanspirited, brutal and often violent with sweet-faced, innocent fans who merely wish to convey good wishes.

That is probably as valid as an arrant suggestion that Donald Kingsbury is a jealous chucklehead who wouldn't know if he were being insulted or put-upon if the offenders performed their acts using jackhammers and IV drips.

Nonetheless, to remove from the equation any slightest hint of special pleading, of self-defense, of rationalization for a monstrously uncivil Ellison . . . I have obtained the letters, have seen to an editor's attestation that they're real, and I've opened the parade of the damned with three writers who have been known for their kindness, civility, leaning toward fan interests, their good upbringing and unblemished courtesy.

So even if one one-millionth of the ugly tales told about your compiler-of-the-facts is true, it has no bearing. Let us simply look at what *other* writers say.

You'll enjoy, particularly, the letters sent by women writers. You think men have it bad? Listen to Marta Randall:

Dear God, Harlan,

I'm absolutely appalled at this idea you've generated about your Westercon speech. Not that I think it shouldn't be done, and that it's high time, and all that stuff, but I admire the sheer, unadulterated, brazen *guts* it takes to get up before a roomful

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of fans and tell them about all the terrible things they've done through the years. Visions of stonings and crucifixions, vituperation and much noise, howlings on panels and illiteracy in the pages of fanzines—it's positively delicious. Do it. I won't be there to see it, but I'll be with you in spirit.

Most of the assaults upon me by fans have been verbal. The chubby young woman in Renaissance drag who interrupted me at a party, pushed my companion aside, stared at me, and said: "Oh, that's what you look like. I read a book of yours once and I couldn't understand a word in it." The intense fellow who approached me in a hucksters room, asked if he could ask a question, and when I said yes, he said, "I've read everything you've ever written, from your first short story on. I really loved that first short story a lot, but the rest of your work stinks. Would you care to comment on why your writing has gone downhill?" Two years ago, I was injudicious enough to write a letter to a 'zine responding to someone's typically fug-headed statements about another writer, and received a response telling me that I was obviously a neophyte because this bozo had never heard of me, and if I'd send this guy a copy of my books, he'd be glad to tell me what was wrong with them. The fan who got blotto at a dead-dog party, fell asleep in the con suite at my feet, and spent the next day telling everyone he'd spent the night with me. The Trekkie at the one *Star Trek* convention I was inveigled into attending, who said of my books, to me, "Well, if they're not about *Star Trek,* they're full of shit."

It ain't much, thank God, but you're welcome to use it, and my name.

I just had a terrible thought: what if your speech simply gives them more ideas?

Do you begin to see a thread? This is the second time the suggestion has been made. As nervously as many writers sing the praises of their fans, do you begin to perceive: *they're afraid of you;* afraid of what you're capable of doing, as lark, as gag, as obsessive self-amusement.

Here's Asimov:

> In general, my readers are a very nice bunch of people who virtually never impose. . . . There are the teachers who force all their students to write me painstaking scrawls and make it necessary for me to answer politely because I can't bear to disappoint kids. (I'd like to strangle the teachers, though.)
>
> However, *once* I blew my top. A bookstore owner asked if I could sign "a few" books for him. I sighed and said okay.
>
> Next thing I got huge packing

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crates containing every book of mine he had in the stores, scores and scores and scores of them. My first impulse was to throw them away and claim they never came. My second was to keep the books for use as gifts (or to a deserving charity). But I couldn't do that. I had to sign them all, reassemble the packing cases, hang them together with ropes and then my wife and I had to stick them on luggage carriers and lug them to the post office which was several blocks away (and I'm not exactly in my first youth any more). The only satisfaction I got was to write the bookstore fellow an eloquent letter that probably singed all the hair off his head and body.

Which is as likely as that the idiot understood he'd made an impertinent fool of himself to begin with. I've told Isaac a hundred times that just because we're both Jewish, does not mean that we must suffer two thousand years' retroactive persecution at the hand of human trash like this bookstore fellow. And did he even *understand* what he'd done, after Isaac apprised him of the monstrous imposition? No, I'd venture not. Because, you see, that's another aspect of this:

Stupid enough to commit the sin in the first place, means a singularity of tunnel-vision, a self-involvement, a lack of empathy, that blinds them to the awfulness of what they've done . . . even when you explain it slowly and simply.

For instance, I'm rewriting this essay in my bed, as I went in for fairly serious surgery little more than a week ago. A number of fans found out about this, and so I was pleasured, three days before Christmas, by a bookstore owner in the LA area, who has known me for years, who called and asked if I'd mind if he came by with a book of mine someone had just bought, for a personal signature. He had spoken to me the day before, and knew I couldn't move out of the bed for fear of the sutures giving way, but he called to ask if I'd mind, during my recuperation, if I'd sign some goddam book for a customer.

I was astonished and told him I was in bed. He asked a second time. I said, "I'm rec*up*erating! I was three hours under the knife! What the fuck do I care about signing some book for a stranger at this time!?!" So he suggested he come by tomorrow, instead. I hung up on him.

Do they understand, Isaac? Not bloody likely!

They feel as if *we're* being rude to *them.*

Barry Longyear wrote one of the most touching of the letters I received in reply to my query. For personal reasons, I'll only reproduce excerpts here . . . the totality is too intimate.

> Early in my career, shortly after the publication of my pun story *Duelling Clowns,* I was at one of my first conventions (a

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Boskone, I think). This fan, equipped with the disposition and general build of a gorilla, stops me in the hallway and asks, "Are you Barry Longyear?"

"Yes," I replied, preparing to bask in author's glory.

He hauled off and decked me. "That's for *Duelling Clowns,*" he said; then he stormed out of the hotel. . . .

About a year after completing my treatment for alcoholism and drug addiction at St. Mary's Rehabilitation Center in Minneapolis, I attended my first convention since sobering up. This was the time when my *real* fan horror took place.

At that time I was still very uncomfortable in drinking situations. Even with a year of A.A. under your belt, early sobriety is a fragile thing. Since MiniCon was being held in St. Paul, about a ten minute drive from St. Mary's Rehab, I figured if I was ever going to be safe at a convention, MiniCon would be the best bet. . . .

The next morning I was up early trying to figure out what one does at a convention at 7 A.M., never before having had this experience. I was a mite shaky in the self-image department, so I decided to give a fan a thrill and let him eat breakfast with a real-live big time SF pro. This particular fan was on the con staff and had just gotten off duty. In the hotel restaurant we sat down and placed our orders. Every pore on my body was open, waiting to absorb sorely needed compliments. He finished his breakfast, sat back in his booth and smiled at me as he looked up from my name tag. "Well, Barry," he said, "what is it that you do that rates you a guest ribbon?"

As I watched the staved-in hull of my career sinking into oblivion, I focused on my grapefruit and muttered something about doing a little scribbling now and then.

And they say fan sensitivity is dead.

Terry Carr isn't with us anymore, but here's one he told me, that you might not've heard. When his first novel came out, half of an Ace Double called *Warlord of Kor,* it was around the time of DisCon, 1963. The first wife of a well-known fan (who was sitting in the audience as I delivered this essay verbally), came sauntering up to Terry, and Terry was expecting some small recognition from her that his first book had at last been released, and she said to him, "I've just read your novel. I wanted to introduce myself." And Terry smiled, because we all expect kindness our first time out, and she said, "What did you write that miserable piece of shit for?" And she stood, hands on hips, waiting for the pain to translate itself into guilty apology. And Terry said, "I wrote it for seven hundred and fifty dollars," and he walked away.

This one is from Gene Wolfe:

The worst was inviting me to

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be guest of honor at Icon in Iowa City. Rusty Hevelin was fan guest of honor, and we were told we would give our speeches Friday afternoon.

Then Friday evening.

Then Saturday morning.

Then Saturday afternoon.

Then Saturday evening before the play. At no time were explanations of any of these postponements made.

I arrived at the play at about eight P.M., once more keyed up and ready to speak. First Rusty, then me. Right.

The co-chair got on stage and announced that the guest of honor speeches would be given *after* the play, and I walked out.

About fifteen minutes later, Rusty found me and asked if I were going to speak after the play. I told him no—he could, if he wished; but I would not. He explained that he intended to refuse, and he'd wanted to suggest we act in concert. Our little meeting ended with our agreeing to strike the convention, which we did. To the best of my knowledge, it was the only time the fan and pro guests of honor (all the GoH the convention had) have staged a concerted labor action.

This was the convention at which the banquet (Saturday evening before the play) was held in the corridors and on the stairways, because the committee had failed to arrange for a room, tables, and chairs.

Here's a nasty little one from the elegant L. Sprague de Camp.

On the whole fans have treated me very kindly. There was, however, a time a few years ago when a group of admirers of H.P. Lovecraft became so exercised over the critical remarks in my biography of HPL that they discussed hitting me in the face with a cherry pie at a convention.

At the Fantasy Convention in Fort Worth, in 1978, word reached me that someone in this group would undertake this form of literary criticism. A pair of large, muscular fans, who make a hobby of martial arts, appointed themselves as bodyguards. When I finished my presentation, a young man, bearing a brown-paper package of about the right size, approached. My defenders asked him what he wanted. Without a word, he turned and went away. So I shall never know for sure what was in that package; but I can bear my ignorance with becoming fortitude.

From Bob and Ginny Heinlein:

Dear Harlan,

Since we retired behind—

Get this, folks!

Since we retired behind *an unlisted telephone number and chain link fence and electric gate,* we've been pretty free of horror stories. Except one.

One night I was working in my office. There's a pane high up in the door, but it would take a giant to look in through that

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pane of glass. I can't see anyone shorter than that if I look through the pane.

The bell rang. Startled, because I hadn't let anyone in the gate, I answered the door, and there was a creep. His first words were, "Someone killed my peacock."

I'm afraid that I told him to get out, and that if he didn't, I would call the sheriff.

He didn't climb the fence again, but for days there was some kind of wire "sculpture" left at the mailbox. Each day a new one. And letters. Etc. I never laid eyes on the man again, but I haven't forgotten him. . . .

There were endless drop-ins years ago when we lived in Colorado, and quite a few here until we had the gate installed. Robert once had a phone call—during a cocktail party we were giving. A woman called from Kansas, wanting to know whether she should go to the Menninger Clinic. And we've had our trees decorated with toilet tissue, and so on. We've even had our lovely house sign stolen.

Here's a quickie. Raymond E. Feist tells one about a fan who showed up at his door a bit before seven A.M. of a Sunday, while Ray's nursing a fever of 102, after a restless night and he'd finally fallen asleep. So he staggers to the door, looking like hell, and here's this cheery little fan cherub with a paper bag full of books to be signed. Maybe a dozen books. But since Ray had only had a few titles published at that time, what he was looking at was three of each, probably to be sold.

And this kid demands Ray sign the books, right there, right then. And Ray says, "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm sick as a dog, hundred and two fever, I feel like hell." And the kid sorta blinks and doesn't say anything, but he just stands there. So Ray says, "Could you come back another time, this is a little inconvenient," and the kids says, "I'm flying back to Hawaii." And Ray snuffles, and says, "I'm sick . . . couldn't you maybe . . ." but the kid just keeps on demonstrating this absolutely *sensitive* demeanor, and keeps wanting the books signed.

"That, and the death threat I got on my answering machine," Ray says, "convinced me to take my number out of the phone book."

Another major writer I contacted for this piece was so nervous about fans giving him trouble, though he called them "creeping morons," that he refused to let me use his name in any way. He said that attending conventions had thrown him so far off his writing that all he wanted to do was absent himself utterly from any access by fans to his life.

I won't yank your chain on this. There *were* some writers who answered my request with letters that said they tended to stay away from fans, stay away from conventions, and so they didn't have any gruesome anecdotes to relate. There were about half a dozen—Marvin

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Kaye, Algis Budrys, Dean Ing, John Varley, Jack Williamson, David Bischoff—who said they'd had nothing but pleasant relations with their fans through many happy years of association, and they were sorry but they simply had nothing to pass along. Those letters, however, were written in June of 1984, and I've had four of that group of six admit that they had, in fact, suffered a number of wretched experiences—which they recounted with detail and anger—and they simply didn't want to cause any trouble.

But how about Joanna Russ? If there has been a writer more passionate and outspoken about what concerns her in art and in society, who has been more forthcoming about putting those concerns in her work, I don't know who it might be. Unlike many of the writers I contacted, who were "prudent" about saying *anything* for fear one of you little psychotic darlings might seek retribution, Joanna was candid; and she wrote:

> Yeah. The *worst.*
>
> Well, besides the folks who send novel manuscripts with instructions to tell them "where to send it," (I got three last week) without postage—
>
> I guess the worst was several years ago in Boulder, when I got a letter from what appeared to be a junior high school student, asking me to answer three pages of questions about my "philosophy of life" since her teacher had told the class to do a research paper on a living writer. She also asked for one (1) copy of everything I had written.
>
> I wrote gently back, explaining as tactfully as I could, that no living writer had time to answer three pages of questions about anything, and that I barely had enough copies of my work for myself. I suggested that she buy some of them herself, since I had to pay for them, too, and that she ask her teacher how to do library research, since I suspected that was the sort of thing her teacher had had in mind originally. I then wished her good luck in her career and ended the letter.
>
> Several weeks later I got a letter from her older sister, who threatened to expose me in *Ms.* and a few other magazines, since my cruel answer had blighted her sister's life and career. Sister (she said) had planned to become . . . *a writer,* but after my callous and vicious treatment, said sister only lay on her little bed and cried all day. I had utterly ruined her life. (I am not making this up.)
>
> Or maybe it was the consciousness-raising group that threw me out on the grounds that I was too articulate.
>
> Or the folks who ask for a signed photograph ($9 to me) sans remuneration and also sans stamps.
>
> The funniest was a fellow who wrote from Walla Walla that he had read *The Female Man* and just loved my mind. He also loved my photograph on the

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back and assured me that he was a fun-loving soul who wanted to correspond with me about my philosophy of life (what *does* that phrase mean?). When I wrote back that I had no time for handsome men of 5'11" with fun-loving souls, or anybody else, I got a second letter which dwelt on my physical charms and sort of lost sight of the book, which I don't think he read (just between you and me and the lamppost).

And the women who write me, complaining about what I let be done (me?!) to covers of paperback books of mine, and refuse to believe that I had nothing to do with it—

Or the friends and colleagues who say, "Why don't you just live off your writing?" and refuse to believe that I have never gotten more than a $3500 advance for a novel, save once—

My favorite horror story, after the sisters business, was an open-mike women's coffeehouse where I read one Saturday night. Two solemn and impressed young women were talking afterward, and I heard one say (of me), "She's so *creative*." A friend found me bashing my head against a wall in sheer frustrated rage. After a bloody quarter of a century of enslavement to this particular obsession, after work, work, work, endless work, to be told, yes, you are so "creative." Pork chops.

Good luck with your speech. It ought to make wonderfully ghastly reading.

* * *

Oh, it does make ghastly reading, Joanna.

But you think *you've* got problems, what with naïve readers blaming you for what publishers put on the covers of your books? Well, how about when they *pretend* to be naïve, merely to cause you grief? What do I mean? Well, here's a classic, fortuitously recent, example of just how malicious fans can be.

In the Letters section of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* for December 1989, there appears a communique from one Paul Osborn of Bremerton, Washington. (At least, the letter is *signed* as being from someone named Paul Osborn, and the postmark—I'm told—was Bremerton, Washington. But not all is what it appears to be, in the world of science fiction's feral aficionados; as we shall shortly see.)

After dealing with other matters in the previous March 1989 cover-dated issue, the alleged Mr. Osborn writes as follows:

"I liked the Ellison story very much, but why was it listed as a novelette when it was shorter than two of the short stories in the issue?"

Now that's a perfectly reasonable question to ask, and as anyone familiar with Occam's Razor would reply, "It was probably an editorial glitch, a production error that no one caught." Which is *exactly* what it was.

The story in question, "The Few,

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the Proud," is a mere 3600 words. It runs seven and a third pages. It is obviously not a novelette. (The universally accepted designations for story-length are as follows: short story, length under 7500 words; novelette, 7500 to 17,500; novella, 17,500 to 40,000; novel, 40,000 and up.) My preceding appearance in *IAsfm,* in the previous year's mid-December issue, *had* been a novelette: "The Function of Dream Sleep" at 9900 words. So it's conceivable that one of the editorial assistants got them switched around in memory. Whatever.

The point is, even to the slowest intellect going, this is a simple, human error that took place prior to publication; and a transposition so unimportant (appearing as it does only on the table of contents) that it didn't amount to a mote of dust in the course of literary history.

And had the alleged Mr. Osborn stopped there, having asked a reasonable question, it would have been the kind of letter one would expect to receive from a rational reader. But he didn't. Here's what follows, in the same paragraph:

> I suppose a cynic would say that Mr. Ellison, The Guy With Lord Knows How Many Hugo and Nebula Awards (But Always Ready For MORE MORE MORE!!!) is trying to put a fast one over on Duh Hicks from Duh West by calling a short story a novelette. Since there are always fewer novelettes published in a year than there are short stories (in 1988 *Asimov's* published thirty novelettes versus fifty-three short stories), this stratagem gives "The Few, the Proud" a decided edge. As I said, this is the response of a cynic, and I've given up cynicism for Lent. But by the time the annual index rolls around (and with it, the Readers Award poll—another chance for MORE MORE MORE!!! awards) Lent will be over. I'm looking forward to it.

Heaven knows there is no shortage of paranoia in the world; but even in a Universe of Conspiracy Theories that load of ignorant drivel is laughable. As if I, in Los Angeles, managed somewhichway to gull the editor—who paid me by the word and knew very well how long the piece was—the managing editor, the editorial assistants, and the contracts manager, all of them three thousand miles away in New York, into letting me suborn them into mislabeling a short story as a novelette for the demented purpose of affording the story a chance to win an award, the designations for which are set by parties unknown to me, *who count the wordage!*

And how did I manage to do this?

Do I have unspeakable secrets that can be used to blackmail these individuals? Did I pay out vast amounts of money to insure a better shot at winning awards that are basically useless to me after thirty-five years at the writing profes-

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sion? Is there anyone in his or her right mind that could credit any of what the alleged Mr. Osborn suggests as anything more than lunacy?

Even the most naïve reader, unfamiliar with the more esoteric aspects of magazine publication, would perceive that this was a straightforward production error of the most common, most inconsequential sort. And one would dismiss the alleged Mr. Osborn's babbling as the ruminations of someone being intentionally silly.

But let's look at what he actually wrote.

As one who *lives* in Duh West, the paralogical reference to Hicks from Duh West makes no sense at all.

But consider the suggestion that lies passim the convoluted assumptions of the alleged Mr. Osborn's proposal: Ellison has won all these awards, but he's greedy, never has enough awards. But those awards weren't won for the quality of the work, they were somehow managed, coerced, manipulated, all the way back to the first one in 1965, and for the next twenty-five years. By incredibly clever means, Ellison has managed to put it over on the hundreds and hundreds of individuals responsible for awarding the Hugos, Nebulas, Edgars, Bram Stoker, P.E.N., Writers Guild, British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards this Machiavellian no-talent has accumulated.

Not to mention somehow managing to hypnotize the readers of, say, *Locus,* who have voted for Ellison work over the years, in the number of thousands.

When the letter appeared in *Asimov's,* the magazine should have allowed me the courtesy of replying on the same page to the alleged Mr. Osborn's fever-dream. But not even the managing editor, Sheila Williams, took the letter very seriously. It was clear the author of that delusion was so sophomoric and so off-base, that there wasn't much point in replying. Nonetheless, Ms. Williams wrote a response:

> When the Fourth Annual Readers' Award poll does appear, readers will be asked to look at the stories carefully and to *only* rank them in the category under which they are listed in the Index.

Which is beside the point.

It doesn't address what Mr. Osborn (alleged) was *really* up to.

Because, if it were simply an overly punctilious reader being foolish enough to comment on a glitch as obvious as this even to a neophyte, then why the need for all that glop about MORE MORE MORE!!! (and each time the phrase appears, he puts three exclamation marks)? We are drawn to dismiss the whole thing as, well, ignorant drivel; and I would have done so, too, except years of dealing with this kind of mentality makes my antenna quiver.

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And so I got the address of the correspondent from *Asimov's* (there had been no direction by the letter-writer that the address was to have been withheld), and I called information in Bremerton, Washington. And not only is there no Paul Osborn at the address on the letter, there is no "Paul Osborn" listed in Bremerton at all. And a simple check of public records in Bremerton advises that the parties listed as living at the address the alleged Mr. Osborn gave as his own, do not seem to go by the name Osborn.

So who is this letter-writer, who cobbles up gratuitously insulting codswallop? From the evidence of the letter, it is a regular reader of science fiction . . . what we call a fan. And it is one who thinks himself (or herself) devilishly clever, to go into left field to spread just another tiny slather of ugly supposition on a loaf already redolent with myth and bullshit. What kind of mentality is so meanspirited?

How many other writers have suffered this kind of odious letter-hacking opprobrium through the years? And how many work-hours have been lost in trying to rectify the lousy impressions made by these people? Enough hours to write enough books to fill a large showcase. Books no one will ever read.

What toll does it take? Here's a small part of a four-page, single-spaced letter in response to my original query. It is from David Gerrold:

"The thing is, Harlan—I made a mistake. I thought that fans were important. If I'd never been introduced to fandom, I'd have saved five years of mistakes. Indeed, I credit my relationship with the more hostile elements of the fannish community with being partially responsible for a five year slump in my writing." David then goes on to relate anecdote after anecdote—one deranged woman who convinced a group of fans at a convention that she was carrying David's baby—a fan who sent him a greeting card that was personally inscribed, *Merry Christmas to Everybody. Except you.*—a fan who solicited contributions supposedly intended for the benefit of another fan who had been robbed . . . who didn't even exist—and he ends his letter as follows:

> Curiously, there was a time when I thought the core of fandom was basically good people; it was only the fringies who were dangerous. . . . I'm not willing to believe that any more. I'm not willing to be as accessible to fandom as I used to be. To do that would be to subject the writer inside to the kind of shitstorms that produced the slump in the first place. . . . Since I left the fans behind, I have become the writer I want to be.

Not just to writers comes this unwanted attention. Ask any one of a dozen artists whose names have appeared on Hugo ballots in the past ten years how they re-

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spond to their paintings being stolen from the art show exhibition rooms, no matter how tough and wary the security guards; ask them how swell they feel when the fat fan scrutinizes the minimum bid on a painting and turns to the creator to snarl, "Who the hell d'ya think you are, Frank Frazetta?"; ask them how their hearts sank when they got back the unsold artwork after the convention and found one of the oils had been slashed, how they felt that there were footprints on the black-and-white sketches.

But don't ask Tim Kirk about conventions, because his face is a mask of sorrow. He hasn't been to a convention in more than nine years and, if he's lucky, he won't have to attend another one. He's more than disenchanted. He's forlorn about what fandom appears to be in his eyes these days. He won't use the word pathetic, he prefers bathetic. But he knows that whatever pinnacles of artistic achievement he has scaled, or yet will scale, it has been in spite of fans and their "support." Because all they ever required of him was that he draw cute and harmless five-finger exercises. (By the thousands, for fanzines, who never paid him a dime.) Tim doesn't berate fans, or put them down, or rail against them. He doesn't say what I'm saying here in public. He knows better, as do so many other artists and writers—who seem to fear this loving cadre of vampire fans—not to stir the pot.

But if you catch him late in the evening, when he's other than his usual quiet, charming self, he'll make it clear that the worst thing fans did to him was deny him the challenge of being as complete an artist as he wanted to be. Perhaps it's not their fault—they like what they like, and they want more and more of it, without change, without growth, without experimentation—but if an artist has a responsibility to his craft, then it doesn't seem uncommon to expect the audience that also demands the artist's attention to show some sort of responsibility to the artist.

From Gregory Benford:

> The oddest incident I recall is a fellow who sent along the predictable idea for a novel, with the usual deal: you write it, split the money with me. When I sent it back, unread, he replied with a warning—not that I shouldn't use the idea myself in fiction, but rather, a demand that he'd better not see me publishing research on this idea in the scientific literature!
>
> He honestly thought his notion was Deep Stuff, and I, the sinister scientist, would ache to enhance my skinny publication list with a milestone paper on the wonderful whatsit.
>
> Ah well.

Ah well, indeed. The heartfelt sigh, the resigned shake of the head, and the dismaying certainty that the varieties of these individual lunacies is uncountable. If they

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don't get us with the compendium of horrors already explicated, they do it like this . . .

From Spider Robinson:

> Total stranger calls up from "somewhere in California" at 2 A.M. Says he's been thinking hard about suicide, and wants to know, is there really a Callahan's Place, and if so how do I get there, I *have* to know, *tonight*. Five minutes after the conversation ended, of course, I figured out just how I should have played it: told him yes, The Place is real, given him a set of bogus directions to anywhere on Long Island, and hoped that on his way across the continent he ran into something that cheered him up. But I am not a trained crisis-call jockey or suicide counselor; what I *did* on the spur of the moment was what any jerk would have done. You make your own Callahan's Place wherever you go, always darkest before the dawn, a year from now you'll look back on this and laugh, why don't you tell me a little about what's bugging you and maybe we can find a way out together. . . .
>
> He hung up abruptly.
>
> My firm belief is that he either died or tried to, very hard, within the ensuing fifteen minutes. I'll never know. I don't even have a first name for him. I went through changes the next few weeks. What I came away with was *anger*. Because I once entertained that guy for an idle hour, he repaid me by dropping his entire kharma, too heavy for him to heft, onto my lap, while making sure I'd have no place to *put* it.

Big surprise, Spider. That's standard operating procedure for this kind of emotional vampire. I wish I had a quarter for every "suicide" who has called me . . . and always at an indecent, inconvenient hour. And they never tell you who they are, they only want to whimper and moan about their unfortunate state of existence. The first hundred or so times it happened to me, I got all puffed up with human compassion and a sense of responsibility, and tried to talk them down.

Perhaps it helped, maybe it didn't. Who's ever to know? Because these wee hours parasites haven't the common decency ever to let you know, later, that you were of any value. They just flap in, unload their shit, make you feel awful, and then cut off. These days I have a very different manner with such intruders on my privacy.

But that was only the beginning of Spider's letter. He had a second story about another looneytune who appeared at his door. And then he offered *this* charming (and absolutely emblematic) delineation of the Fan Mentality at full flower, the stone fan being itself *in excelsis:*

> Jeanne and I are at a con; some fans announce they're taking us

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to dinner. Great, we're broke, and we're starving. So we drive, and we drive, and we drive. An *hour,* and Jeanne, as even-tempered a woman as ever lived, is threatening mutiny if we don't arrive soon. I should have guessed, from the way the driver kept giggling. An hour and a quarter after we had eyes to eat, the three-car caravan of fans pulls up in front of a roadside beanery called, you guessed it, Callahan's. The food was *awful,* the prices were horrendous, the service slovenly, and when the check came we learned for the first time that no one had figured on paying for our dinner. I mean, we're all fans together, right?

We did *not* pay for our dinner—we *couldn't!* We were broke and living off editorial charity for the weekend. But it was an unpleasant moment, complicated by the infuriating awareness that they had done all this to show us how much they loved us . . .

And he went on to deliver up a few more pain in the ass stories, ending his letter like this:

> Hope all this is of help to you. Frankly, I don't hold out much hope that *anything* can smarten the little darlings up.

The list of authors and artists who have been stiffed with bounced checks for their services at fan-engineered conventions and media "spectaculars" is as endless, as well-tenanted as is the list of writers and artists who have had fans mooch meals, lodging and loans from them. Whether such productions have been conferences cobbled together by hubris-surfeited fans at colleges they attended (who rigged the gig just so they could meet "their favorite author"), or at hotels in large cities, whether as *Star Trek* conclaves or as comic book/movie-tv/science fiction gatherings. Writers as prominent as Sturgeon, Herbert, Asimov, Clarke, Niven, Simak, Bova, Moorcock and Sheckley (to name just the few whose unprofitable experiences come quickly to mind) have found themselves lured at one time or another to some speaking engagement or convention that was nothing more than a demented wish-fulfillment in the litter-filled head of an adolescent fan, have found themselves having lost actual speaking gigs or trips because they thought they were committed for a job that never materialized, have found themselves at one time or another holding bad paper laid on them by a sweet-faced fan.

Joe Haldeman wrote:

> One recurrent problem is that I write hard-science sf but am no scientist, and so occasionally screw up. There are legions of weirdos out there who read with a calculator in one scabrous paw. . . . There have been a couple of potentially dangerous crazies. I got a scrawled note after *The Forever War* came out, con-

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gratulating me for "giving it to the Jews." All I can figure out is that one of the first people to die in the book is named Rabi, a Muslim name. But that guy probably sees Hitler's face in his Rice Krispies. . . . One strange time a drunkish fan followed me around a convention rather late at night, trying to talk me into playing poker. I finally acquiesced, and three or four of us went up to his room, where he produced fancy chips and cards. At that time I showed him that I only had two dollars' cash on me, two antes. He was outraged and actually pulled a knife. I took it away from him easily enough . . . but it was one of those experiences that's more scary in retrospect than it is when it happens.

I mean, Charlie Manson was a science fiction fan. I'm not so worried about the crazy letters and the occasional fan who starts sputtering at you in public. I'm worried about the quiet guy with a hair up his ass and a pistol in his pocket. Face it, Harlan; we get up on enough stages and sooner or later that guy is going to be in the audience. Let's hope he can't shoot straight.

He was in one of my audiences, Joe. He shot straight enough. Remind me to tell you that story some time.

That's one of the stories I *can* tell. There are many more anecdotes and horrors I've been asked *not* to pass along. There are stories I've been told "off the record," in strictest confidence, *sotto voce* and *sub rosa*, stories whose tellers could not stop themselves from imparting the dire news, but who, as they completed their tale of woe, suddenly realized this would see print. And they asked that their names be withheld. These are stories I cannot verify . . . from sources who insist on remaining unnamed . . .

Such as the very famous older writer, a golden age star name, who took a fan in to stay at his home, who only asked the fan to babysit when the writer and his wife had to go out, who didn't discover till weeks after the fan had left, that his "guest" had sodomized the writer's eleven-year-old granddaughter.

Such as the fantasy author who had written a strongly sexual novel, who was spat upon at a convention.

Such as the elderly writer who was forced to move from her apartment to escape the attentions of three fans who would not stop calling her, writing her, and coming to her house unannounced.

And more, and more, and more. But this becomes only the heaping on of redundancies. To what end? To the end of buttressing the reality of what writers suffer with many of their "loving fans" so solidly that not even the smallest rathole of rationalization—such as the "Well, Ellison is such a visible target, he deserves what he gets" *non sequitur*—is left to the guilt-ridden apologists who will bristle and rage at this essay.

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After I had delivered this material at Westercon 37 in Portland, in 1984, I received a great many letters from pros and fans, horrified by the extent of this problem.

How about this, from Simon Hawke:

> Not long ago, my agent was trying to sell something of mine to an editor who shall go nameless. (And I will not divulge the name, don't ask.) Keep in mind, this is an editor I've never met or spoken to, but one who knows that Simon Hawke used to write under another name. (I am a very different person now in many ways. Older, wiser, calmer and more philosophical about life's various disappointments.) This editor took one look at the proposal, at my name on it, and—I have it on very good authority from someone who was in the office—rejected it without even bothering to read it. Apparently, this editor was once on a train, en route to a convention in Boston, and recalled a group of female fans, sitting at the other end of the car and talking loudly enough that she could hear them, discussing my 'sexual excesses,' rather like a group of high school girls comparing notes, apparently in so detailed and graphic a manner that she was so put off, she remembered it *years later* and it influenced her opinion of me. I was not someone she wanted to do business with. And the reason I know this is that she mentioned the incident in the office, where my acquaintance overheard.
>
> Now, at the risk of seeming overly self-effacing, while I have, in the past, occasionally gone to bed with someone I met at a convention, I am not Warren Beatty, nor am I De Sade, and I am not exactly John Holmes. In short, I am an average lover at best, I like to think considerate, affectionate, and giving, but by no stretch of the imagination am I a sexual athlete. Not to put too fine a point on it, I don't know who those women were, and while it's certainly possible I may have met one or more of them, perhaps even been intimate with one of them, though I cringe at the thought, I certainly did not do anything so out of the ordinary that it would excite any comment. Certainly nothing that would disgust anyone. And yet, though this incident does not begin to approach the sort of awful things you spoke of, it tarnished my reputation in that editor's eyes and it cost me a sale."

Like many people, I used to think that you attracted that sort of thing, unintentionally, by virture of your highly visible profile and your aggressive, up-close-and-personal demeanor. I was wrong, as you so demonstrably proved by citing those

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who gave your letter a serious response. I had dropped out of sight, not going to cons or even speaking to editors, letting my agent handle all my business, anxious to put to rest, once and for all, the sort of gossip that had been floating over my head like a Sword of Damocles.

Mildred Downey Broxon wrote, in part, "That was a zinger of a speech at Westercon, and was the sole topic of conversation for many hours afterward, at least among the shaken and drained group in which I found myself.

"Your inclusion of 'testimonials' from other sufferers added verisimilitude. It could, after all, be argued that your high visibility and assertive personality make you a natural target; but the evidence of other, widely-assorted victims was damning."

She said something even more interesting, and I'll get to that in a moment; but the authentication of what I've set down here, by the testimonial of the editor, parallels my actually displaying the letters at that Guest of Honor banquet. *This* time I didn't want the alleged Mr. Osborns of fandom to have a free shot at invalidating the message, muddying the water, diverting the focus . . . by calumny heaped on the messenger. Even if I cop to all the ugliness rumor and gossip lay at my door, even if I am as beastly as the fan mill suggests, how do the apologists explain all the rest of this litany?

As Malzberg said, the ninety-five per cent of you out there who are decent, sane, rational and courteous, those of you who are horrified at these revelations, will not know what to make of it all, because you don't act that way and you won't be able to fathom how others *can* act that way and think they're cute or anything less than loathsome. But the five per cent—a few of whom will no doubt appear in the letters column in a forthcoming issue to explain just why writers *do* deserve to be treated like shit, how we would be nowhere if it weren't for their valiant support of our careers by expenditure of their hard-earned pennies, how we have no right complaining and should be slavishly grateful for even vicious notice—that five per cent will continue in its brutish ways.

And after I delivered the material you've just read (which has been augmented by additional contributions from writers whose replies reached me after the Westercon, or who were solicited recently for a few updatings), here's how I ended my Guest of Honor speech:

(I said:) I've saved the best for last. Of all the things that have been done to me—and I have only scratched the surface here—and of all the things that have been done to other writers and artists, the prizewinning monstrousness, the anecdote that I think will put the last nail in the testament, comes

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from Alan Dean Foster.

I've saved it for last, because not even the most vicious detractor can find a bad word to say about Alan Dean Foster. He is as decent and courteous a man as one can hope to meet.

You ain't gonna believe *this* one.

Dear Harlan,

In re yours of the 5th. I have only one incident that might suit your purposes and I still haven't quite figured it out. I was heading back to my hotel room in the company of one of the con staff, after delivering the guest of honor speech at the past Okon, when someone yelled, "Alan Foster?" and I turned around and they hit me in the face with a paper cup full of warm vomit.

To this day what puzzles me is not the attack itself, which one comes to expect after a while, but the type of mind that not only could conceive of such a thing but actually find amusement in the preservation of its own vomit for the purposes of using it to assault another person. Someone had to throw up carefully into a cup and then carry it around with them while in the process of searching me out. To me, that's infinitely sicker than actually throwing the stuff.

Oh, gentle reader, you should have seen that banquet hall as I read from Alan's letter. The room was packed—if I recall correctly, something in the range of fifteen or sixteen hundred attendees at that Westercon—and delivering this talk took an hour and a half. As time went by, and name after name came before them, as incident of awfulness followed incident upon anecdote, the room fell silent . . . the timorous, nervous laughter that had accompanied the telling of the first few stories, even that had ceased. At one table a woman was crying, her head laid down across her arms on the tabletop. At another table a man kept striking the padded seat of his chair, over and over, hardly seeming to know he was doing it. A woman was in the rear, moaning stop it, stop it, please stop it. A man standing against a wall had his eyes closed, swaying, rocking, back and forth. And from everywhere in that large ballroom, when I read Alan's letter, came the gasps of disbelief. At last, at final measure, *now* they couldn't deny the underlying message of the speech. All had been preamble. Now they were drained, horrified to their shoetops, stony-eyed and pale, a great room filled with decent human beings who had to admit, at last, that their ranks contained a few of those who are unforgivable.

I had just turned fifty years old. Little more than a month earlier. And one of the fan dealers had taken note of that fact, and had produced an item to sell at this Westercon whereat I was Guest of Honor. And so this is how I finished my lecture:

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"And where does it all come to mean something, to have a purpose, this dreadful litany of rudeness and impositions? What is the point? Well, it comes to a fan/dealer having the notion that printing up T-shirts that say, oh so cleverly,

50 SHORT YEARS
OF HARLAN ELLISON,

to be sold at a convention where this Harlan Ellison is the Guest of Honor, without even suggesting that the man whose name he's selling for five dollars a shot might be entitled to a royalty, much less be entitled to a moment's thought that the T-shirt might be insulting, is acceptable behavior.

"But no one makes those considerations, and dozens of such T-shirts are sold, and worn, as I can see from here that many of you have decked yourselves out in precisely that item of finery, and you come up to me, and you stand right in front of this alleged 'Guest of *Honor*' and you ask for an autograph, or you ask a question, or you make a comment, wearing clothing that mocks my height (a fact of nature over which I have no control, as opposed to your bad manners, which are entirely of your own making), and not one of you thinks the subject of the T-shirt might be hurt by such an insensitive act. One *must* assume none of you gave it a consideration, because the alternative is the contemplation of someone who throws warm vomit.

"And the subject of the T-shirt's logo only smiles as he signs your autograph, appearing properly slavishly grateful for your attention, and the fifty-year-old man says nothing.

"But like George Alec Effinger and Stephen King and Barry Malzberg and David Gerrold and Tim Kirk and many, many others who asked that their names not be mentioned . . . the short fifty-year-old man will resist more and more ever going among such people.

"Because they are not kind. And one need not put up with unkindness from those who pretend to be all of the same family of noble dreamers, not when there are so many total strangers in the world who will be beastly without reason.

"Children of our dreams, so many of you have said. Oh, how I was moved by what you wrote; oh, how you turned my life around; oh, how much this or that story meant to me when I was lonely and desperate. Children of our dreams.

"Xenogenesis.

"The children do not resemble the parents.

"And many of you wonder why some of those literary parents think positively of the concept that birth control might be made retroactive."

That was the end of it, or at least it should have been. But reality continues to challenge our best fantasies for the title of Most Unbelievable.

In the weeks that followed the speech, as I said, I received a lot of

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mail about the presentation. All of it was of this sort, represented by an extract from a letter by a young man named Anthony Pryor, then living in Portland:

> Your speech at the banquet moved me greatly. I knew that some insane fans occasionally did unpleasant things to authors; but *this* . . . unthinkable! . . . And so, to show you that your anger, and the words with which you expressed that anger, did not fall on deaf ears, I want you to know that I, as well as many friends to whom I have spoken, will endeavor—if we are aware of it and have the means of dealing with it—to prevent such things as you discussed in your speech from happening. We may never get the chance. The psychotics will continue to insult, injure and anger authors despite our feeble efforts to stop them, but if we can prevent such things from happening just once, it will have been worthwhile.

Which would lead one to believe that, yes, if one makes a case as strong as this, and delivers it with passion and conviction, that it will touch the soul of even the basest listener. Right. And pigs'll fly.

Here is a verbatim extract from the Westercon 37 daily update circulated at that event. It is dated Monday, July 2nd. It was distributed throughout the convention the morning after my presentation.

> RUMOR CONTROL: At roughly 4:15 A.M. several fire alarms were activated in the hotel and some floors were evacuated temporarily. To the best of our knowledge, this is what happened:
>
> A smoke detector was pulled out of the ceiling in the hallway on the 12th floor. This caused an alarm to go off.
>
> A fire alarm was pulled on floor 10.
>
> Activation of the fire alarms causes certain safety mechanisms to automatically engage in the hotel. Fire doors closed. An emergency ventilation system switched on.
>
> One blower stuck. Salon F began to fill with smoke from a smoldering fanbelt on the stuck blower.
>
> Although there was smoke, apparently there was no fire.
>
> We don't know who broke the smoke detector or who pulled the alarm.
>
> All parties were closed down. We appreciate everyone's calmness and cooperation.
>
> UPDATE 7:30 A.M.: At a meeting with Marriott management the significance of false alarms was stressed. The possibility of injury or death is great in any emergency evacuation.
>
> BECAUSE OF LAST NIGHT'S FALSE ALARM, WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ALLOW ANY ROOM PARTIES TONIGHT. IF WE CAN LOCATE THE INDIVIDUAL(S) RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ALARM, WE MAY (REPEAT: MAY) BE ABLE TO RENEGOTIATE THIS WITH THE HOTEL.
>
> If we can't have room parties, we will have a large party in Salon E. This will mean HOTEL LIQUOR ONLY in this space.

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Hospitality Suite will be open in the Presidential Suite until 6 P.M., non-alcohol. At 6 P.M. Hospitality will move to Ballroom level to accomodate (sic) the general dance and party Monday evening. This is in conformance with the "NO PARTIES" agreement we negotiated with the hotel.

The Convention Committee sincerely regrets this major inconvenience. These pranks are a danger to everyone.

And in her letter received by me the week after the convention, Mildred Downey Broxon went on to say, "Scuttlebutt has it that you were feeling as if the idiot who set off the fire alarm might have been influenced by your speech. I tend to doubt that. Such a person probably didn't even *listen* to your speech and, if he heard it, failed to understand what you were saying. It is highly likely that one of these subhumans was to blame.

"However, the incident following so closely on your speech may have caused those few who thought the matter exaggerated to take notice. Nothing like being rousted out at 4 A.M., after all, to make one think. Long and bitterly."

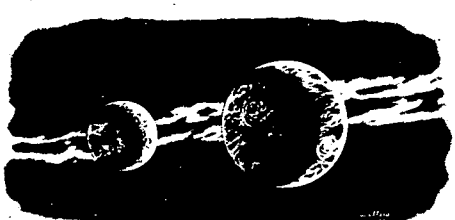
And so, nature imitates nature, sans the art.

There could have been more, much more, to this essay. I have at hand a long series of lamentations by Joe Straczynski on the *new* venue for fan abuse . . . Computer Bulletin Board Systems; and a late reply from Jean M. Auel detailing a demand for money "anywhere from $20 to $8000" by a fan; and a ghastly incident that happened to Joe L. Hensley . . .

But you get the idea.

And those of you in the sane, courteous ninety-five per cent . . . well, perhaps this concentrated jolt of nastiness will alert you to the other five per cent who roam and foam among us. The alleged Paul Osborns of the world. Those who come slouching to the party given by the noble dreamers with that little paper cup hidden behind their back.

Warm vomit. Xenogenesis. Have a nice day. ●



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That spring, the Niger had gone dry. Ahmid, my castrato driver, careened our jeep down the riverbank and sped northwest up the dusty riverbed. "All the roads out of Niamey are blown in with sand," he said. "We will make better time here."

I had read the night before in *Le Sahel* of a military caravan that found a jeep, just like the one I was in, stuck in a sand dune that had blown over the main road to Tahoua. No one was in the jeep, or near the jeep, and the soldiers found no sign of driver or occupants. The wind had blown sand over all their tracks and eventually, no doubt, them. "Maybe they saw the mirage of an oasis within walking distance," one of the soldiers theorized. It was a terrible story. I was glad to be driving up the riverbed.

We passed under the Kennedy Bridge, and in the brief moment we were in its shadow I felt cold. "You will not shiver again today," Ahmid said, very serious.

I looked back at the bridge and saw a thin man start across it from the south, driving three goats before him. Behind him came a woman carrying on her head a bundle of the black cloth favored by the Taureg. We were getting a late start. But the jeep wouldn't start in the night, and though the minister of mines herself, Aissa Seibou, had come with the mechanic and waited with me and Ahmid in the shed while we watched the mechanic work, it took time to change a fuel pump, and then the water pump just in case, and then to put on the new belt I insisted on. "I will follow you in two days," the minister had said. "By then you will have seen and studied these uranium fields as I have, and you will agree with me."

Such confidence. But I was prepared to believe her because I had read URANIGER's reports on the potential of these mines, and the World Bank was prepared to believe me and back my recommendation when I gave it. The Bank had money to fund only one project that year in West Africa. The directors had narrowed their choices to two projects: one, a loan to help develop uranium mines in Niger's Zermaganda province, eighty kilometers northeast of Sinder; the other, a reforestation project in the highlands of Guinea around the source of the Niger so that rainfall might increase and in forty years the river might flow again to the sea, not dry up at Lake Debo in Mali. The reforestation project offered enormous long-term benefits decades after its start. But exploitable uranium lay waiting in the desert now. West Africa needed help now. Aissa Seibou was probably justified in feeling confident.

I turned back around and watched the riverbed ahead of us. "How often do you get flash floods?" I asked.

"That Allah should send us rain," Ahmid said, with almost a laugh. But after maybe ten minutes he looked hard at me. "If you see any cloud, however small, tell me," he said.

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Ah, I thought. So we *would* have to get out of the riverbed. Fast.

We careened around a bend, and there were four women ahead of us, digging in the dirt. Ahmid sped past them, blowing them with dust, but I looked in the hole they were digging and could see a fifth woman in it scooping dirt into a bucket and lifting it up to those above her.

"Have you found any water?" I yelled in French.

But the women just waved.

"They will not find water," Ahmid said.

We drove through all the heat of that day and toward evening were approaching Sansanne-Hausa, where they were building a camp for the Taureg. The Taureg were finally coming into camps, driven this time by a famine that would not end. Ahead of us I could see great mounds of dirt piled up in the riverbed and maybe twenty Zerma women. "Stop the jeep," I told Ahmid.

He stopped it. I climbed out and pushed through the women that rushed up around us, left Ahmid to keep them away from our water, and climbed up a mound of dirt twice as tall as me. At the top I could look down into a great hole maybe forty feet deep. Three women were digging down there, tying their buckets to ropes. I pulled one up for them. "Have you found any water?" I yelled down, first in French, then in Hausa which they could understand.

"No," one of them yelled back.

That night I dreamt I was walking in the Gaoueyé district of Niamey, though I had never gone with African whores, not after geneticists in Lagos won the War of the Sahel for the coastal dictatorships by spraying the Sahelian troops with mutated viruses that had since spread among whores all over the continent, some of whom could live for fifteen years with the viruses in their bodies. Those viruses could kill a European like me before a doctor could diagnose which virus had attacked me and get the antidote.

But I let a woman lead me up rickety stairs to her tiny room that looked out over the banks of the dry Niger. Her room was filled with plants and flowers that must have cost her a fortune to water. The room smelled clean, and she smelled clean, and I wanted to keep touching her but she pulled back and told me that if I held this certain cloth over my eyes I would see the Niger with water in it. It was the blue cloth she wadded on the floor to keep sand from blowing in under the door. She played these games with me. I knew that. I suddenly knew it was not the first time I had been with her, that I knew her well.

I put the cloth over my eyes. Nothing happened, of course. I thought she would kiss me after a minute, but she didn't so I took the cloth away.

"No. Put it back," she said.

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She looked so serious. No smile. This was an odd game. I put the cloth back, then felt her small hands press down over my eyes to hold the cloth there, tight.

So I relaxed and lay back on her bed that smelled of her and thought I would play this game out, whatever happened, whatever she wanted.

And gradually heard water flowing by outside in the Niger, lapping the riverbank. I pulled her hands away, and the cloth, and looked out the window at water.

"I didn't know if you could see it," she said, and she smiled, happy that I could see the water.

She had sprinkled some drug onto the cloth and I was hallucinating, I thought, but the hallucination was lovely. She led me back down the stairs that were somehow sturdier now, and we walked to the river. The water was cold, and clean. I drank it.

"You will not get sick," she said, and she drank some water herself, then gave me water to drink out of her hands, then more water, then more. I drank it all.

And woke sweating in my hot room in Sansanne-Hausa. I got up and drank real water from the flask I'd carried in from the jeep, then walked to the window and looked out. The Tuareg camp lay black outside the city, a sea of tents, no fires among them. That sedentary camp marked the death of nomadic Taureg civilization.

We got another late start that morning because Mai Maïgana, mayor of Sansanne-Hausa, insisted on feeding me breakfast. It really was very good: a mango imported from Brazil, dates, goat's-milk cheese, water. "You can tell the monsieurs of the World Bank that Sansanne-Hausa will meet its population quota," he said.

I murmured something polite.

"All of Niger will," he said. "When we began this, when the Bank gave us our quotas, some said 'how can a country drop from sixteen million people to four hundred thousand in two generations,' but we are doing it and without massacres like those in Mali."

The Mali had massacred their Tuareg who would not submit to population control.

"But the Tuareg do worry me," he went on.

I looked up at him.

"They do not believe in a neverending famine until they walk to the Niger and see that it is dry. They believe the camps are set up to castrate their men."

"Aren't they?"

"Only if they father unlicensed children. But it is dangerous to go out

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there to abort babies and castrate men, or to castrate the illegal male babies that somehow get born. A doctor was murdered in that camp just last month. I have to send the doctors in with troops."

Castrati troops, no doubt, who, like my driver, had been illegal babies themselves. Such men were supposedly the most efficient at that sort of work.

"We will meet our population quota," Mai Maïgana said.

We drove all day, but the riverbed past Sansanne-Hausa seemed to wind more, and it was rocky and difficult to drive over. Once we drove up what had been a long oxbow that dead-ended, so we had to backtrack. By night, when even with the weak headlights we could not see well enough to drive, we were still maybe forty kilometers from Sinder. So we stopped and slept in the jeep. "We can be in Sinder tomorrow by noon," Ahmid said. If we were delayed much beyond that, I knew, someone would come driving down the Niger looking for us. We built no fire. The day had been hot, and now the night was hot. Ahmid took the first watch.

Sometime later he shook me awake. "You had better wake up," he said. I thought it was my turn to watch, but I looked at my wristwatch and saw that it was just after midnight.

"Get up," he said.

I sat up and saw that veiled Tuareg men were standing around our jeep. Some had guns pointed at us, others had drawn knives. One started talking to me, fast, commanding, repeating one word over and over: *attini, attini.*

"What does he want?" I asked Ahmid, hoping he could understand Tamasheq.

"Our water," he said. "And your boots, and your shirt, and our food, the blankets, my belt, our extra clothes."

Then I remembered what *attini* meant in Tamasheq: *give me.*

"Do you speak French?" I asked the Tuareg, thinking I could reason with them, tell them I was here to help them, but not one of them would talk to me in French. I tried Hausa, and the little Yoruba I knew, but they would speak only Tamasheq, and I knew only a few words in that language. I could not speak it. Ahmid had to translate for me.

One of the Tuareg reached in the back of the jeep and took out our water. I let him.

"They want your boots and shirt," Ahmid said.

I took off my boots and handed them to the man who had spoken Tamasheq at me. I handed him my shirt. They took the other things they wanted and walked away behind us, tall, regal. It was as if we were a caravan and had just paid them tribute to pass through their lands.

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"Why didn't they take the jeep?" I asked.

"The army would find that," Ahmid said.

I looked back at the Tuareg, but in their black robes they were already indistinguishable from the shadows of the riverbanks. I suddenly felt sorry for them. They had taken tribute from us, but they had no future outside of the government camps.

Ahmid slept fitfully while I watched. We both wondered if the Tuareg would come back or if others would come along and rob us a second time. Ahmid finally gave up trying to sleep, and we started off for Sinder long before dawn, driving very slowly, creeping around the rocks and holes in the riverbed till it grew light enough to see to drive faster. We had nothing for breakfast, and no water to drink. Once the sun was up, I could not stay awake. I dreamed again of my whore in Niamey. She pressed the blue cloth to my eyes, and when I could see the river we went walking along its banks.

She had brought a picnic of melons, clean, juicy, and bright green. We ate on the grassy riverbank, in cool shade under a great tree, and I marveled at the beautiful greenery all around me. I no longer believed I was drugged.

"Is this what was, or what might have been?" I asked.

She just smiled at me, and when she smiled I wanted to love her, there, on the banks of a watery Niger. I took her in my arms and held her, tight.

"Love me," she said.

"I do," I said.

"Love me for a long time, not just today," she said.

"I will."

She broke away from me, picked a leaf from the tree above us, and pressed it into my palm.

"Love me," she said again.

And I did.

I woke sweating, and sunburned. The Tuareg had taken everything I could have put over me to keep off the sun.

"We are soon at Sinder," Ahmid said. "They will have creams for your skin there, and a shirt."

I sat up straight and rubbed the sweat off my face—but regretted that. My face was so sunburned it hurt to touch it.

"Were you dreaming?" Ahmid asked.

I nodded. "Of a beautiful woman."

He looked concerned. "A woman, you say?"

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"Yes, Ahmid." I regretted mentioning women to him, a castrato. He could never know the things I knew. I did not want to hurt him.

"You do not understand what such a dream could mean," he said. "The Djenoun blow about on winds across these empty lands till they find a man's mind to inhabit. If one troubles you, tell me and I will pray to Allah for your protection. Allah can protect you, even in your dreams."

I could not believe that he believed what he was telling me about the Djenoun. Yet for one moment I wondered if Tuareg superstitions could be true, and if a Djenoun were haunting my mind. If she were, I would not ask Ahmid to pray to have her taken from me.

I looked at the palm of my hand, but there was no leaf in it. I looked at the dry riverbanks above us on either side and wondered what they would look like wooded. Then I realized I had come on this trip with my mind made up. I was going to recommend the uranium mines to the World Bank. I had never seriously considered the trees.

We passed four Tuareg women in the streets of Sinder. One looked like the woman in my dreams, then I thought all four did, then I thought every woman I saw—Songhai, Hausa, Fulani, Tuareg—all looked like that woman. The old French nurse who doctored my sunburn at the clinic looked like that whore. They were all beautiful. I thought that I had never looked at women like this before, that I had never realized that all women were beautiful. I loved them all. We got water, food, gas, clothes, and struck out across the erg to the Zermaganda uranium fields.

And they were everything I had been promised. URANIGER had set off one thousand seismic charges which proved the deposits greater than those at Arlit, the mines that made Niger the world's fifth largest uranium producer. The Zermaganda mines would make them the largest. I spent two days studying the ore and the results of the seismic charges, talking with the geologists and walking with them over flat-topped gara and down dry wadis to the best sites. But I spent my nights studying the reports on reforestation. I realized that plan was too modest. The source of the Niger needed to be reforested, yes, but so did the sources of five of the major tributaries. If that happened, and if the rainfall increased as might be expected, the river might flow.

Aissa Seibou arrived late that second day, and though tired from the journey from Niamey, I could see the enthusiasm in her eyes. She looked beautiful to me, like my whore.

"What do you think?" she asked.

I smiled. "I think this deposit will be everything you dream of," I said.

"You will help us, then. You will recommend us?"

That was the question.

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"Money from these mines would give us money to import water from the sea," she said. "The coastal dictatorships are killing us for water."

It was what the War of the Sahel had been fought over. By international law, every nation had rights to water from the sea, including landlocked nations like Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso. But the coastal nations were reluctant to give them land for desalination plants—they wanted to sell them water. Taxes for road repairs on the roads used to truck water inland, charges from the trucking firms, tariffs were not enough. International law was not enough. And the Sahelian nations had lost their war and now had no choice but to pay for water trucked in from the coast.

"You have seen what this country has become," she said. "If even four hundred thousand people can live here we need money. We need these mines."

"Have you studied the reforestation proposals?" I asked.

"You can't be serious," she said. "There is nothing to reforest in Niger."

"But there is in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali. If it works you would have the Niger again, and be freed of the stranglehold of the coast."

"In forty years," she said, incredulous.

I dreamed that night of my whore in Niamey, and she was big with child. "You fathered her," she said. "She will be your daughter."

This was an unlicensed child, and I was horrified to think that she would be aborted.

"Only if you tell the authorities will your daughter be aborted," she said. "Otherwise all people will love her when they see her."

"You can look in the blue cloth and go to the Niger with water," I said, "and stay there."

"And wait for you to come," she said.

Then I understood that the blue cloth did not show what was or what might have been. It showed what could be, and, I hoped, what would be.

"Name your daughter *Fecund,*" she said.

I thought that name more beautiful than any I had ever heard. "I will come to you," I said. "Down this river when it flows again, to these trees."

She smiled, and behind her I saw the desert greening.

I made my recommendation to the World Bank, and they accepted it. But Aissa Seibou did not leave me in anger. I agreed to stay on with her in Niamey through the summer to help her find outside funding to develop the Zermaganda mines. Ahmid and I followed her jeep back to Niamey, down the dry Niger. We stayed maybe half a kilometer behind her, out of her dust.

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Once we rounded a bend and ahead of us, against the bank, I could see the whitened bones of some great animal.

"Hippopotamus," Ahmid said. "Extinct here now, forever."

"Maybe not," I said.

"Ah, that Allah should send us hippopotamus again," Ahmid said.

I had him stop by the bones, and we walked over to them. The skull was gone. "It is worth money in the markets of Niamey," Ahmid explained.

All that was left were the ribs and leg bones, a few neck vertebrae. Dry leaves had blown in under the hips. I pulled out a handful of leaves and crumpled it.

"We should go," Ahmid said. "Aissa Seibou will be far ahead of us."

I picked up one dry leaf to take with me. We walked to the jeep and started driving again for Niamey. I held the leaf in my fingers, but it crumbled away piece by piece and blew off into the dust billowing behind us. ●

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MRS. BYRES AND THE DRAGON

by Keith Roberts

Keith Roberts has been both an editor and an author of science fiction. In the late sixties he edited the British *Science Fiction Magazine* (later renamed *SF Impulse*), and he has since written a number of science fiction novels. His touching tale of "Mrs Byres and the Dragon" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

art: Pat Morrissey

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The garden was elongated and small, paved for much of its area. The irregular slabs were laid without benefit of cement; between them, rock plants had been encouraged to grow. Camomile, decorative thymes; and a shamrock-like affair with dark maroon leaves. In late summer its seed pods, like the small shell cases they resembled, became explosive; let the breeze but stir them and they jerked in unison, there was a sound like the tiny clatter of musketry as the barrage was discharged. It startled the Dragon once when he sniffed at it; he fled hissing, vanished beneath the garden shed. He turned in his own length, lay glaring with his lovely dark amber eyes; but he was not pursued. In time, his breathing became more regular.

At the sides of the garden, between the paving and the low walls that enclosed it, narrow beds had been invaded by the flat rosettes of the London Pride. In their season, the plants sent up a host of delicate flower stalks; the many tiny blooms made a mist of palest pink, interspersed by the blue of the forget-me-nots that still maintained a foothold. Mrs. Byres had been tempted to thin out the invasive saxifrage; in the end she had allowed it to remain. It belonged there; as indeed did the Dragon.

In the center of the place, a round, raised pond held koi; it was Mrs. Byres' pleasure of an evening to sit on the stone coping, drop crumbs of biscuit to the clumsy, gentle fish. The multicolored shoal moved slowly, rising faster to snap and gulp, then resuming its slow circling. The patterns it made were endlessly repeated, never twice the same. The air pump gurgled gently, drops pattered from the bowl of the tiny fountain; she would find her thoughts drifting far off, aimless as the fish, to distant folk and lands. Till the cooling air impinged on her awareness; she would pull at the cardigan round her shoulders, walk to the house and gently close the door.

The fish intrigued the Dragon, too. He would crouch, neck weaving and tail lashing, eyeing the parapet above him. Nerving himself for the spring and clatter with which he finally gained the vantage point. Once arrived he would stare intently, golden eyes flicking as he followed the movements in the water. Once, greatly daring, he reached to dabble with a claw; some vague thought of hunting maybe formed in his mind; but the biggest of the fish turned quickly. The great mouth globbed and plopped, sent him scurrying for his refuge once more. The hissing sounded from beneath the shed; wisps of vapor escaped from his nostrils. It was some time before he was calm again.

He was a small Dragon; perhaps some twenty inches from nose to tail. Though the flexibility of his neck was deceptive, as were the length and dexterity of his tongue. This he used to take the black and brown beetles that scurried from time to time across the flags. He would crunch them with quick movements of his jaws, spitting out the hard wing cases.

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These he brushed into the cracks between the paving slabs, anxious it seemed to leave no trace of his presence; though Mrs. Byres in fact knew the whereabouts of each tiny hoard. The beetles, with the pill bugs he nosed from beneath the rosettes of the London Pride, comprised his major diet. Plus earthworms when the need arose, though the latter he disliked; for their fustiness of flavor, their slow, shining movements, their faster looping when attacked and caught. He would snort with disgust, rubbing at his slender jaws and nose, spitting out the fragments of dirt and mold with which their intestines were crammed; he was much relieved when he found the first plate of cereal tucked beneath the shed. Though for some time he was afraid to approach the strange object. Instead, he eyed it from a distance. It lay directly in his path; the track worn by the passage of his body, the deeper hollow he had scooped out for himself and in which he slept. He approached finally, by cautious, six-inch rushes. His neck snaked, unsure; his nose moved from side to side, skimming the surface of the bowl, savoring the delicate, unknown odor. Finally his tongue flicked out to touch the milk; next instant he was drinking and snapping, unsure how best to cope with the strange food. He didn't stop till the offering was licked clean. He slept contented that night, and with a full belly; for the first time, it seemed, in his life.

Next day he found the tall door of the shed left open a little. Previously it had always been securely locked; though it is doubtful if his brain had registered the fact. He sniffed at the crack, cautious as ever, weaving his head, blinking his brilliant eyes. The darkness attracted with its promise of a lair, concealment; yet also he sensed danger. A trap maybe. He was a creature built largely of instincts; now they conflicted, hopelessly. He ran in small circles, claws tapping, growling a little; backed off, moved forward, backed away again. He sat on his haunches, propping himself on his tail like a small green and gold kangaroo. Finally, greatly daring, he extended a claw to the edge of the door. He pulled at it a little. A long creak from somewhere; he tensed, but nothing further happened. He jumped inside, spun round instantly to make sure his way of escape had remained clear. A further period of immobility; and he began to explore, timidly and with many backward glances. Nothing happened however; and soon he was trotting round busily, snuffling at the board floor of the place, snorting from time to time at the dust that entered his nostrils.

The shed was mostly empty. Some garden tools leaned against the wall; to one side was a small wooden bench. On it, inaccessible to him, stood paint tins and the like; a roll of plastic netting, stacks of old magazines, assorted seed trays and flower pots. The sprays and cans of weedkiller, usual appurtenances of suburban culture, were absent; but Mrs. Byres hadn't studied with the Theravadians for nothing.

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At the rear of the place, immediately below the one small window, was a round, flat bag filled with some crunchy substance. He climbed onto it, was alarmed afresh by the unsure, yielding surface. He turned round several times; finally he settled, eyes fixed warily on the crack of light from the door. He crossed his forelegs, dropped his muzzle to them. Despite himself, he felt secure and comfortable. He started once or twice, at half-imagined sounds; finally his lids drooped. The orange glow faded, was eclipsed.

He was roused, finally, by the light that streamed in from the square of glass above him. The yellow patch angled across the boards; above it, specks of brilliance swirled and were lost. He was off the beansack in an instant, claws scrabbling; but the door was still ajar, showing its tall strip of sky. Just inside it stood the bowl, blue patterns round its edge. He stared, long neck snaking suspiciously. But nothing had been moved; the tools stood by the wall, there was the same scent of dry earth and dust. He hurried to the bowl. He buried his muzzle, drank thirstily; once more he didn't stop till the china gleamed.

He was late for his first patrol. Though it is doubtful if the notion would have held meaning for him. Rather, it was a habit formed; and in habit lies security. He nosed the door a fraction wider, pausing carefully; but the fountain still tinkled, the flags lay quiet in early sunlight. Beyond the garden the house rose tall, Edwardian and sturdy. Its rear walls had been rendered, though over the years the finish had begun to crack and peel. Mrs. Byres had ordered it renewed, in vivid white; the contrast with the terraces to either side was sharp. From the road beyond came the steady sound of traffic; but the noise was muted, barely impinging on the awareness of the Dragon.

His tongue flicked from his muzzle, tasting, it seemed, the morning air. He hurried forward, moving as ever in quick diagonal rushes. To one side, the wall was topped by trelliswork; climbing plants shielded the garden and pond from view. On the other, the barrier was lower; but the property had been vacant for some time now. The house stood quietly, moldering a little perhaps, garnering its hourly profit; the profit it attracted merely by existing, here so close to the city.

By the kitchen drain, a flash of movement caught the Dragon's eye. He snapped at it, but the insect had already scurried into a crack. He probed for it, snuffling; but the thing had gone. He turned back, searched the nearer of the borders. Its edge, where it joined the paving, was marked by tiles of dark, glistening blue, each set upright in the earth. The line of them was crooked; their tops were decorated with wavy indentations. He crunched a small snail that clung to one of them, and hurried on.

Behind the shed, past the rhubarb clump and the tiny vegetable patch, chestnut palings leaned uncertainly, rotted here and there and patched

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vividly with fungus. He eased through one of the gaps thus formed and stopped, claw raised. Close to the fence grew the remnants of an old, gnarled hedge. Its roots twisted and writhed; sprays of small green leaves burst up, making an overarching canopy. Here the biggest worms of all came, sudden and unexpected, spurting from the carpet of damp humus; and here too he had once encountered a cat. The animal stared at first, as if unable to believe its eyes; then it approached stiff-legged, fur bristling. A threat rumbled deep in its throat; and the Dragon backed, his own tail lashing. A flurry of paws, brief scuffle of black and white; and the cat fled squalling, gained the roof of an outhouse with a single galvanic bound. It crouched there an hour or more, glaring; from time to time it scrubbed at its face with a paw. The fur of its jaw was singed, its whiskers shorter on that side and curling at the tips. Since when, at sight of a flicker of green and gold, it had turned away, staring into distance with the fixity only a discomforted cat can achieve. In the tomcat's world, Dragons had ceased to exist; they were figments, obviously, of another imagination.

The Dragon paused again beneath the hedge, glancing upward briefly; today though, nothing moved. A plane flew across the brilliant gap of sky, the sun glinting on its fuselage as it turned for the airport a few miles distant; but it was disregarded. The Dragon scuttled forward, pausing only to take a woodlouse that bumbled aimlessly over the fallen leaves.

Access to the rest of his domain was gained by a similar gap in the once-stout line of fencing. Here, the Dragon at once felt more secure. The grass in the untended garden had sprouted high; under cover of its drifts and clumps he was hidden from all but the most vigilant eyes. The bases of the old walls yielded a rich supply of livestock; above, buddleias drooped their white and purple cones of flowers. Butterflies came to them through the warm afternoons; he would watch their bright movements, hissing a little, making tiny, futile rushes. Sometimes, when the insects dropped down to the lank-stalked dandelions, he would snap at them. He never missed; but there was little substance to be had. He shredded the wings, irritably; his muzzle became marked by pastel tints, brightness added to his own bright scales. Later, tiring of the game, he would curl up in a beaten nest of grass and sleep. As he slept now.

Mrs. Byres was unsure just when she had become aware of the existence of the Dragon. At first he was a shadow; a hint, a vagueness, a twinkling in the dusk. It was only later, and by slow degrees, that he took on form and color. Though he was best perceived still from the corner of the eye; the glance that, in traveling away, reveals more than the full, ungracious stare. As the mind, lulled by the glidings of the koi, may itself glide off,

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to light on other things. She smiled at that and took herself upstairs, left him to his sunlit scutterings. She herself had seen much strangeness; seen, and finally accepted. She had seen fires blaze where no fires could be, fires that burned silver against the high snow; she had seen the *tulpa,* the creature of the mind, glide mysterious through room after strange room. While the priests chanted, the mantras extended themselves; delicate lines of chalk and sand, growing by the hour, the week, in honor of a God who was, and yet was not. Set against that, a Dragon more or less was nothing extraordinary; not in the real scheme of things. He came from the Otherworld, where fact and fable blend; an alien place perhaps, to all right-thinking folk. He was one with the jaguars and pumas that frighten city dwellers, that flourish in the newspapers only to vanish away; the black dogs, born of thunderbolts, that terrorized the folk of former times. Their own fears, given form and substance, come to score displeasure on the stout oak doors of churches, leave the marks for all the world to see. Though there was no fear in the Dragon; not if he had truly sprung from her own mind.

She took down a book, old and bound in leather. She turned the pages gently, found the place she sought. *There is nothing strange,* she read, *in the fact that I may have created my own hallucination. The interesting point is that in these cases of materialization, others see the thought-forms that may have been created.*

Tibetans disagree in their explanations of such phenomena; some think a material form is really brought into being, others consider the apparition as a mere case of suggestion, the creator's thought impressing others and causing them to see what he himself sees.

Mrs. Byres closed the book and set it aside. Madame David-Neel had understood a little; as much, perhaps, as any one person may. She laid her head back, against the dark plush of the chair. In time, the light from the tall windows before her became diffused. Her consciousness drifted away, among ten thousand Buddha-fields.

There had been much speculation, when she first arrived in the street; the tall, solitary woman, so soberly and plainly dressed, the mane of iron-grey hair always so neatly coiffured, held firmly by great combs. She was old, very old some said; but her great eyes were tilted still and clear, of a color not readily to be described, the skin smooth across her broad, high cheekbones. Wealthy she must be though. The neighbors decided it, watching the furniture carefully carried in; piece after piece, massive, unfashionable, and black. Wife of a planter, a Commissioner; or higher still said some, nodding sagely. Others voiced darker thoughts. England, they said, was for the English, Britannia for the Brits; black lands for the black folk, white lands for the whites. These though were the resentful ones; encountering her in the street, on her way down to the

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shops, they had found they could not readily meet her glance. Her face was gentle and calm; but she looked into you, through you, in a way that was disconcerting. They repeated their suspicions to their wives; slammed their front doors; settled, relieved, to their suppers and their telly.

Perhaps Mrs. Byres heard the rumors, perhaps not. Either way, it made little difference. She was not rich; a little saved, from a lifetime of quiet service, a pension from a Government that at the end had recognized her worth, but that was all. Bringing her belongings back, the belongings collected over so many years, had strained her slender resources; but that had been in accordance with the Sahib's wish. Unspoken perhaps, but nonetheless keenly felt. As for the rest; there had once been a time for anger but that was in the past, too distant almost for recall. Then, certainly, her eyes had flashed, the color risen to her cheeks; but it was all so long ago. She had seen too much of human frailty since; her own, and that of others.

She relaxed deeper into the chair, in the study she had made for herself and where, surrounded by familiar things, she still felt most at home. Here were the square dark cupboards with their ornate, once-gilded handles, the great sideboard, mirror-backed, standing on its many tiny legs; the bookcases with their black, carved tops, fashioned with such crude care. Brass trays shone softly from the walls; Hanuman, the monkey god, gestured above the hearth, trampling his tiny enemy. The sacred cobra spread his seven hoods; while in an alcove were the old coffee pots, with their bulbous bellies, their long, incised spouts. All but valueless, as she was well aware; but she wouldn't willingly have parted with them. They spoke of another life, another land, both gone now into the past. Somewhere though the blades of fans still whispered, their sound mixed with the rustling of garden trees; the sun burned through the slats of white-painted jalousies. Mrs. Byres smiled slightly to herself. When they placed the infant Buddha beneath the rose apple tree, its shadow became fixed; it was Earth, and the cosmos, that circled round it. Shadows, perhaps, became fixed in memory, too.

She shook her head, eyes closed. There had been good times, in those far-off days; when she was young, before she learned of pain. They glimmered in the mind, like the scoured wards of the hospitals to which she came, the uniforms of the young men who paid court, in their scarlet and blue and gold. Though it had been difficult, she supposed, to see things in their proper light; difficult at least for one so fresh from home, so eager. Her mother's whispered warnings, the insinuations, hints; sudden anger with which she clattered kitchen things, pounded at the bowl held in her lap. She who was normally so gentle. "Never smile for them," she said once, bitterly. "Never show your teeth. That way they can tell . . . " It had all seemed pointless, in the bright environment, in the bright new

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life, vague as nursery fears. Though children's fears were often sharp enough; the shadow-beasts had teeth and claws and eyes. They existed of course, and had their being; but their realm lay beyond the bedroom walls.

The flowers, calling cards, brought new responsibilities; impossible to refuse, gross, in that climate, to accede. She swung, helpless, between unreachable poles; lowered her eyes uncertainly, feeling herself besieged. It made her suitors the more ardent.

One young man had become special. She resisted; but despite herself the dreams had come. The voyage, over so much ocean; the house she would come to as a bride, the great house in a land she had never seen. She didn't blame him, hadn't blamed him then; but it had been hard. He should have been warned, by the averted eyes, the whisperings; by the raven-gloss of hair, the skin that tanned too readily, however she might seek to avoid the sun. She should have warned him; but her throat seemed blocked, the words refused to form. She twined her fingers in her lap; till the monstrous revelation came, the moment that could no longer be avoided. "Open your mouth," he said in disbelief. "*Open your mouth . . .* " Shocked, she obeyed; and the sounds of the little orchestra, the chatter of the diners, faded quite away. He took her jaw, turned her head as he might the head of a colt, before he started back. Her legs unfroze then so that she ran from the place, left her wrap, her purse, ran into the hot, stinging night. She wrenched the flowers from her dress, the bouquet that had turned all eyes; worn at the waist, like the romances she had read. But romance was over now. A pin tore her finger. The blood that ran was red enough, bright as a white girl's blood; the rest of her was chichi, and disgraced.

The Dragon had been dreaming. His legs twitched, his snufflings became more urgent; finally his eyes jerked open. They blazed momentarily with alarm; but the grass round him was undisturbed. The sun was lower now, the shadow of the fence creeping forward; and a breeze had risen, tempering the warmth of the day. He blinked, brushed briefly at his muzzle and scurried for the hedge. Just what the dream had been he could not recall; but there had been great shapes moving, noise and blood and fear. He made for the little shed, and the safety of his beansack.

Mrs. Byres straightened, rubbing her face a little ruefully. India, allegedly, was a land of ghosts; it seemed some had traveled with her, locked away behind the drawers and paneling, now to be released. She shook her head again and rose. She replaced the book on its shelf, walked through to her bedroom. She removed the inlaid combs, began, carefully, to brush out her hair.

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She had not, of course, been able to remain in her employment; not after the shame she had brought. Thinking of that, her brow furrowed momentarily, her hands paused in their work. After the first anger, it had been the shame that was hardest to bear. Yet bear it she must, for she had transgressed. How, and in what manner, had been made hideously plain; and the tale had spread. The same thought was in all their minds, the same look in their eyes; Matron, the priest, her fellow workers on the wards, the casteless women who scrubbed and waxed the floors. She sat at her dressing table, then as now, touched the skin that had betrayed her while the great dark eyes watched back in misery; in the morning, she packed her things. But flee as she might, rise, as she strove to rise, in the esteem of others, the whispering pursued her. Despite her beauty, and beautiful she was alleged to be, she was a renegade, an outcast; a black girl who had tried to pass for white. Till finally she came to the high snows; and there at last, perhaps, was whiteness enough for all.

She brooded momentarily, eyes vague. That dream, too, was soon enough besmirched. They were harsh times, in the high hill stations; for the land itself was harsh. The land, and its people. The women came to her, trudging miles through snow, their bellies slit by jealousy, their entrails in their hands. She saved them, saved their babies; she became to them a god. But her own hands could never be clean again. The hills could never be clean; they were stained with more than sunset light. Until she watched the making of the mantras. She realized then that all was an illusion, that pain and suffering are fleeting as the pangs of joy. And there was peace at last.

Mrs. Byres rose, slipped a shawl round her shoulders. She walked down to the kitchen, began methodically preparing her evening meal. Later, the telephone rang. She eased the shawl back into place, went through to the hall. She stood a moment listening; then she smiled. "Of course, Sister," she said. "Yes, I'll come at once."

The Dragon was both puzzled and alarmed. His head rose, bobbed, ducked again till his long jaw all but touched the earth; his neck extended, telescoped with shock. He raised a claw uncertainly, set it back down; his body trembled, poised as if for flight. But it seemed he could not take his eyes from the scene in front of him.

There were strangers in the garden; the wild place that had once been part of his domain. The men advanced steadily; in their hands were strange devices that barked and screamed, jetted cones of bright blue smoke. Trees and bushes fell remorselessly; sunlight struck the walls beyond, at brash and unexpected angles.

The Dragon edged back, one foot at a time, toward the shelter of the

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hedge. The men were close to the fence now, his beautiful grass all but gone. A fire blazed brightly, fed by the dry swathes; later the smoke swirled low, adding its acridness to the fumes of petrol. Nictating membranes slid across the Dragon's eyes; he blinked, and his nerve broke abruptly. He scurried for home, quick as a flame himself, dived for his old lair beneath the garden shed.

The strangers seized the heaps of branches, breaking them roughly with their hands. They dragged them to the fire; and the flames licked up again. They blazed well into the night; when they finally died down, the Dragon once more ventured forth. He eased through the fence, approached the quivering bed of ash. Heat still radiated from it; the walls were lit by a dull and alien glow. He craned his neck, still only half believing. The garden had been reduced to a rectangle of earth and roots; an alien place, in which he could never feel secure again. He prospected sadly for a time; then he retired to his lair. He no longer felt safe, even on the beansack. He lay pressed to earth, watching the horizontal slit of lesser dark before him, his own eyes glowing a rich, reproachful amber. He wondered how his mistress, if indeed he thought of her as such, could have permitted such a thing; but Mrs. Byres, of course, had had no say in the matter. Vans had been arriving all day long at the house next door; in the small front garden, the blue and white board that had stood forlornly for so long had finally been removed.

He saw more strange things, in the days that followed.

The children the newcomers brought with them were unprepossessing. The girl, a pallid, dumpy creature, adopted the little attic bedroom for her own. She painted its walls blue, spent a week or more decorating them with hearts and rainbows. Mrs. Byres, divining the activity, smiled a little sadly to herself. The results, of course, would be gross. She wondered, not for the first time, at the lack of charity of the Christian god; to gracelessness he so often accords an equal lack of skill. At once, a certain Shade was in the room. Her husband, the Sahib. Strange how she still thought of him as that. It had always been a joke between them; or perhaps it had had its serious aspect. Perhaps the old ideas still lived in her, there was the notion of expiation. He smiled with equal sadness; and she bowed her head. Later, to ease her mind, she took up her sewing frame. On the linen grew broideries of other gods, dark dancing girls; finally, of Dragons. Their eyes were amber, their undersides ridged and pale; their bodies glittered with scales of green and gold. For a time she quite ignored the garden, and the pond. If she was disappointed at finding the shed deserted, she gave no sign of it; she had half expected it anyway. She still left the offerings of cereal; later she prepared her own meals, calmly. Each carrot scraped, each zucchini rinsed and halved, was itself an Act completed, needing no rationale.

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Liam, the younger of the next door children, was coming six; though as yet he had spoken no words. In their place, he made certain sounds; his mother, a wispy, defeated-looking woman, knew the meaning of them all. The commonest, a throaty chuckle, meant that something was undergoing pain; though she had long since concluded it was best to turn a deaf ear. There was nothing wrong with the child, nothing that time wouldn't cure; and in any case the torture had its benefits. It stopped him squalling, got him out from underfoot. The screaming was too much for her, it was all too much; the house, the workmen, constant noise of hammering. One of the men brought a kitten for the boy; a tiny thing, mewing and pot-bellied. Taken from the nest too young, if she was any judge; not that she cared overmuch for cats. Nasty dirty creatures, always underfoot like Liam. Nonetheless she did her best, only to be rewarded by messes. In the hall, under the sink, on the new-laid carpet. Her temper snapped at that; she added pepper to the filth, pushed the little creature's face into it to teach it better manners. Then Liam took it away, and she heard the chuckling start. Next morning it was dead; a damp rag of a thing, scarcely noticed till she all but stepped on it. Liam drowned it, in a hole he filled with water; he held its head down many times, for the pleasure of the bubbles, releasing it occasionally to allow it to cough and spit. But that was of equal unimportance; he was merely growing up a healthy, normal lad.

The Dragon watched the process, again with puzzlement. His raised claw quivered, his head weaved and bobbed; twice his tiny wings rose and rustled, as though he was indeed prepared to fly the scene. When it was over, and the small creature showed no more signs of life, the man-child lost interest. He stumped toward the house, forgetting his bucket and spade, bawling already for food.

The Dragon edged forward, across the dangerous open ground. He nuzzled the little animal; but its eyes were closed, the mud caked into its fur already beginning to stiffen into points. He stared up at the house. As ever, his expression was inscrutable; but it seemed that for a moment his eyes blazed with more than their customary fire.

In the house the woman lay back wearily, a glass in her hand. She drank from it deeply, felt the thirst that always seemed to be on her temporarily assuaged. As ever, she had tried to pace herself through the day. She had done well; supper was in the oven before she turned to the corner cupboard. There was ample need for caution. Only a moment ago, glancing into the garden, she was sure she had seen a flash of green and gold; as though some small, bright animal had scuttled beneath the hedge. She knew from experience what such visual portents meant. She had stiffened with alarm; but now, the gin fumes sliding into her brain, she was more relaxed.

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At least Liam had drifted off to sleep; suddenly and unexpectedly, as was customary with him. He sprawled in the high chair they still used, remnants of food drying round his mouth. If only Mandy would stop making that goddam row though. The thudding from the record player drifted down the stairs, endless and repetitive; but her mother knew yelling would have no effect. She wouldn't even be heard. She lit a cigarette, glanced quickly at her wrist. Her husband would be home at six sharp; and supper had best be on the table, or he would know the reason why. There was time to finish the fag though.

Not that Tom hadn't been good to her, after his fashion; she had a lot really to be grateful for. He had his faults, but that was just his way. He took after his father; real chip off the old block, as he was fond of proclaiming. And his Dad had been a wild one, in his younger days. She wished of course that she could talk to him about Liam; but the subject was a delicate one. Dangerous, if he was just back from the pub. He'd made his own way, like his father before him; these people in white coats, these doctors and psychiatrists, what did they know? Timeservers, the whole pack of them; ought to be given an honest job of work, find out what the world was really like. No son of his would ever need their help; if they knew what was good for them, they'd best keep out of his affairs.

The woman took another sip of gin. He'd had a lot to put up with; she always reminded herself of that. All those years slaving away; and him a full-fledged butcher, paid as a Meat Operative. The chance of promotion had been unexpected; but he'd grasped it with both hands, she was proud of him for that. He was a manager now; which was why they'd sunk every penny into buying the house. She'd been unsure. She hadn't argued though; Tom didn't pay for crossing, not when his mind was set. "Just think of it," he'd said. "Thirty bob an hour that's earning us, just by sitting there. Thirty six quid a day. We can't lose . . . " And that had been the end of it.

She shivered slightly. The thought of white coats had conjured up an image of the *abattoir*; the slaughterhouse, as he preferred to call it. None of those fancy frog terms for him. The lines of men, alien in their protective clothing; hissing of the great hoses; and the flood of crimson, swirling toward the drains. She'd visited the place just once, at his insistence; but she'd refused to go again. Liam though had seemed excited; he'd cooed and chuckled, all the jolting journey home.

The noise from upstairs ceased abruptly. She looked up. Her daughter was standing pouting in the doorway. "I'm 'ungry," she said accusingly.

The woman stubbed her cigarette. "All right," she said tiredly. "All right, don't start. I'm comin' . . . "

The Dragon was in trouble; trouble of the worst possible sort.

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It had all started innocently enough; innocently at least on his part. The folk next door had acquired, or had been given, a puppy; a four month old Alsatian, with paws like large soft sponges and a fine, glossy coat of tan and black. Liam's father, the squat, redfaced man the Dragon feared so much, had taken charge, hammering a great stake into the hard earth by the kitchen door. To it she was tethered, without benefit of kennel. Kennels cost hard-earned cash; besides, the dog was to grow up tough. Dogs should be tough and mean; and the process was to start at once. A plate of scraps was produced, and she was left alone. She keened for a while, interspersing the sounds with hopeful yaps; later it seemed she became resigned to her lot. She settled, nose on paws, watching the kitchen door a few feet away. Presently it opened, and a small boy appeared. He was chubby and fair-haired, and walked with a staggering, curiously uncertain gait. The pup's tail began to thump the ground; but he made no response. He stared down, expressionlessly; after a time he stumped away. When he returned, he was carrying a pointed stick. He gauged the distance, thrust it at the creature's face. She flinched, twisting her head, hampered by the shortness of the chain. The stick missed by inches. Liam thrust again, aiming for the eyes. He began to chuckle.

The Dragon had been attracted by the high-pitched sounds of misery. He left his foraging, eased his way under the hedge. He was unable for a time to locate the source of the distress; an old shed, built largely of tar paper, masked his view. The ugliest object in the garden, it was the one thing that had been suffered to remain. He was forced to advance farther than was advisable across the open ground. He gained, finally, the partial security of a stack of old crates; some of the rubbish the newcomers had brought with them. He was in time to see the puppy, tired of the lethal game, butt the small boy gently with her head. Liam sat down with a thump, and began to howl.

The house door popped open. In her hand, the thin woman clutched an old-fashioned carpet beater. She wielded it, tight-lipped; and the dog began to scream.

The Dragon was transfixed. There was a time, perhaps, when he was confused; but pain-signals are not to be mistaken. He blinked and hissed, scrabbling with his claws; but once again, his instincts were in conflict. A part of him wished perhaps to aid the sufferer; but his paramount need was to stay concealed, hidden from the eyes of all but Mrs. Byres. She, certainly, would never have allowed such a thing; but Mrs. Byres was not at home. The knowledge added to his helplessness; he danced on the spot, in an agony of indecision.

It seemed the beating went on for an age. When it was over, the pup retreated to the farthest extent of her chain and was sick. A final im-

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precation; and the house door closed with a bang. The Dragon ducked and gulped; and the light above him was occulted.

He glared up, blinking. He had stayed too long. Liam was standing over him. His eyes were gleaming; and in his hands was the pointed stick.

The Dragon fled, flame-fast; down the path, into and through the hedge. He dived beneath the hut, scrabbled his way as far as possible into the dark. He hissed again and panted, claws gripping the earth; and in front of him the light was once more blocked. The boy still gripped the weapon; and his movements, now his interest was focused, had become more purposive. He lay down, puffing a little, began to work his way into the narrow gap. The stick wobbled, moving steadily closer.

The Dragon took a great breath, and another. He was trapped; it seemed his heart, in its pounding, might break clear of his body. The stick jabbed; and the fear that was in him exploded, in a great burst of light and heat. The light was dazzling almost, in the confined space.

Mrs. Byres was late back from the hospital. It had not been one of her normal days for visiting; but a lunchtime call had needed her attention and she had stayed on, moving quietly from ward to ward, helping calm and settle the new patients. She spoke to all in the language of their birth, or in a close approximation. The Hindi she had learned at her mother's knee, the Pushtoo she had acquired in circumstances frequently distressing and bizarre; but she had a working knowledge of many other dialects. She knew these people, understood their pride and fear; from small beginnings she had become a tower of strength to patients and staff alike. Though the notion would have been the last to enter her mind. The Surgeon-Registrar, himself a hardworked Anglo-Indian, realized her worth; and his word carried weight. He it was who had defended her, in no uncertain terms, when Admin queried her non-official presence; but of that she was equally unaware. The great place needed her, it needed many like her; but they were seldom to be found.

She rubbed her eyes tiredly, as the bus ground up the long hill toward her home. Today it seemed much power had flowed from her, so that she felt drained; though that of course was a mere effect of age. It had troubled the Reverend Byres, the Sahib, increasingly as his ministry drew toward its close. Though of course he had never yielded to fatigue; if anything, he had driven himself the harder. She would chide him for it, gently; but his answer was always the same. He would take her hand and draw her to him, where he lay back in the long cane chair. "The Lord provides the work, Richenda," he would say, smiling. "It is up to us to provide the strength." And she would smile in turn, lay her hand softly on his forehead; while the fans swished, moths chirred in the endless, velvet night.

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The image had stayed with her, strongly; it was with her now. She did not resent it; rather she welcomed its recurrences. It was a comfort sent by that same Lord, whoever he might be.

The bus had reached her stop; she climbed down, waited her opportunity to cross the wide, endlessly busy road. She turned the corner, past the old cinema that was now a supermarket, headed toward her house.

She paused, frowning slightly. The normally quiet street was full of bustle. Neighbors gawped and clustered; lights of amber and blue flashed from the roofs of cars. The reflections dazzled; so that she raised an arm to shield her eyes, her purse, with the keys, still gripped in her other hand. There were policemen with radios and clipboards, others who wore vivid orange surcoats. The questions confused her momentarily. Yes, she was Mrs. Byres; yes, this was her home. In what way could she help?

A shouting began. Who though was this squat, redfaced man, waving his arms so furiously? She recognized her neighbor, vaguely; the husband of the family who had moved next door. Yet it was not her neighbor. Anger depersonalizes; she had seen such raging faces once before. They surrounded the car in which she sat, helpless; while fists beat at the roof and windows, the Sahib struggled vainly to start the engine. They had been his parishioners once, his friends perhaps; but they were his friends no longer. They had become possessed.

Mrs. Byres shook her head. Someone, it seemed, had been hurt. The child, the stolid, curiously silent boy. Burned, by some chemical; some noxious substance hidden in her shed.

She stepped back, bemused; and the shouting was redoubled. There was the proof, if they needed it; the guilt was written on her face.

But she owned no chemicals, kept nothing there at all. Some garden tools, old newspapers perhaps; they were welcome to see for themselves.

The squalling had not finished. Nor would it, she realized. The man's rage was directed at the world; a cloak and justification for his own inadequacy. Liam, his son, had been seen crawling from her shed. Crawling and screaming, smoke coming from his very clothes. They might yet save his sight; but if she had seen his face. His poor, swollen face . . .

Mrs. Byres opened the front door quietly, moved forward with the others at her heels. She had seen disfigured faces times enough; most had belonged to corpses. One had been her husband.

The handlamps flashed suspiciously, in the little shed. The beams touched ceilings, walls and floor. The policemen prized the lids from paint cans, sniffed solemnly and agreed. There was nothing here.

Still the man had not done. The stuff was in the house. Or she had got wind of what had happened. Yes, that was it; she'd slipped back in the afternoon, disposed of the evidence. Her, the nigger, come to this re-

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spectable street, disrupting the lives of decent folk, poisoning their children. Yes, poisoning their children. He grabbed her arm, and shook.

The bullet shattered her wrist; the one shot fired by the mob as the car finally jolted away. There was no pain as such; she stared instead at the sudden red tunnel through her flesh. Then the spurting began; and she reached methodically to find the pressure points.

The ball had struck a double mark; the carpet was stained beneath the Sahib's seat, his fingers slippery where they gripped the wheel. She said, "You'd best drive to the hospital," but he had shaken his head. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said faintly. "I don't think I can make it." He had, of course; he always completed what he undertook. But it was not Byres Sahib they wheeled into Emergency; the spirit had already fled.

The rioting had spread by then. A lampshade swung and shattered; the orderly who dressed her arm crouched below the level of the windows. The wound healed; but her wrist had never recovered its strength. Now she gave a faint cry, at the sudden pain.

The Dragon heard the sound from where he waited, and his last doubts were resolved. His mistress was in danger; and he felt the strength rise in him. He was growing too, expanding by the second. He reared and bellowed, turned his blazing eyes on the tiny folk below him. His neck arched; flame roared from his jaws. It licked at the houses and the street, the people and the cars. It circled Mrs. Byres, protecting; the others were engulfed. They were dazzled by the glare, and were never subsequently able to explain what happened. "Some sort of thunderbolt it was," confided one young constable to his superior. "Hit the house, then sort of bounced off somehow. Must have done; stands to reason." The sergeant shook his head, riffled the papers in his hands and suggested he start again. Thunderbolts don't go down well, in police reports; the elastic variety least of all.

The erstwhile butcher alone saw what opposed them; so that he ran screaming, and was glad enough, later, of the white coats that surrounded him, the security they brought. He told the tale over and again; the great head swooping from the sky, the burning eyes, cat-slitted in their rage, the mouth that barraged fire. To see it was to see into Hell. The doctors wrote busily, stroking their neat-trimmed beards; then they drove home to their neat suburban villas, where their children placed their toys on labeled shelves. Logic was triumphant.

Hysteria readily becomes infectious. The panic spread outward from the focus at lightning speed. The street outside the house became filled with fleeing bodies, tumbling over each other in their haste to escape they knew not what. The airwaves became garbled. Pistols and riot guns were issued, police cars growled from their yards. The Dragon roared and bobbed, cloud-tall now and lighting up the sky. Hot winds tore at

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Mrs. Byres' clothes. She raised her arms; and his wings unfolded, with a crashing like the long sound of thunder. He soared, gleeful and avenging, into his new element.

The stories became wilder. Reports spread, of a beast that terrified the city; there were tales of fireballs, comets, alien invasions. Lightning flashed and flickered; strange plasmas boiled and spread. The most commonplace of objects, trees and housetops, garden sheds, were outlined with a fierce and spectral glare. In the confusion the Alsatian pup broke free and bolted, having in her mind the beginnings of a thought that subsequently proved true; that the world is a large place, and is not filled exclusively with folk who chain animals to stakes, beat them with wire frames. Nothing more was heard of the unfortunate Liam; while his mother ended her flight on the very edge of town. At which point it seemed best to keep on walking. She and her daughter settled finally in a rural slum, where at least the daily stress was less.

The Dragon writhed forlornly, immense now and himself as vaporous as clouds. The shots, the missiles, tore into him and through. The feeling was defocused; but there was none the less a sense of pain. He realized at that the nature of release, the plane to which he properly belonged. A last convulsion; and far off a woman screamed. A gout of something dark and sticky splashed her wrist; the strange rain pattered on the path around her. She stared; but even as she watched, the spots boiled away to nothing. She set off for home, puzzled at the hallucination; if hallucination it had been. She had read books on the subject; the strangest of phenomena can be explained. Freak winds snatch up red desert mud, whirl it with tornado force; insects in their mass emergences release a bloodlike fluid. Nonetheless she paused, a hand on her garden gate. The sky to the west was furnace red; across it, the last cloud streak of evening took the sinuous form of a Dragon.

The eastern sky was clear and green, the air cool after the disturbed night. Mrs. Byres moved quietly, from the house to the raised pool. She scotched on its edge; ploppings sounded as she scattered food from the round tin she carried. She adjusted the shawl across her shoulders, watched for a while; then she walked to the little shed. Its door was ajar; on the step she placed a china bowl, blue patterns round its edge. She paused a moment longer; then on a whim she plumped up the beanbag that lay at the rear of the little place. The Dragon would be tired, after his adventurings; he would need somewhere to rest.

Straightening, she half smiled. From the tail of her eye she had caught a flash of green and gold; as if some small animal indeed scuttered beneath the hedge. She didn't though stare after him or search; instead she walked to the house, and gently closed the kitchen door. ●

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CURSE OF THE ALIEN'S WIFE

He has become the darkest star
of her erotic obsessions,
the critical mass beyond which
her personality can no longer ascend

or even express itself.
Whenever she considers leaving
he launches the precise sensual bullet
that slaughters her resolve and

rushes her to new heights of excitation;
he is a grave incendiary of the flesh
who ignites her neural corridors
with undivided passion.

At first ashamed of the cries
that rise so freely from her throat,
at how her limbs thrash beyond control
beneath the artful invasions of his touch,

she has since learned to embrace her abandon,
to find a sure purchase on his slippery flanks,
to revel in the fluid guttural oh-so-foreign purr
of his elaborate and fiercely whispered endearments.

And now that his supernal caress has transformed
both the substance and sanctum of her nights,
she knows that no mere human lover
could ever please her again.

—Bruce Boston

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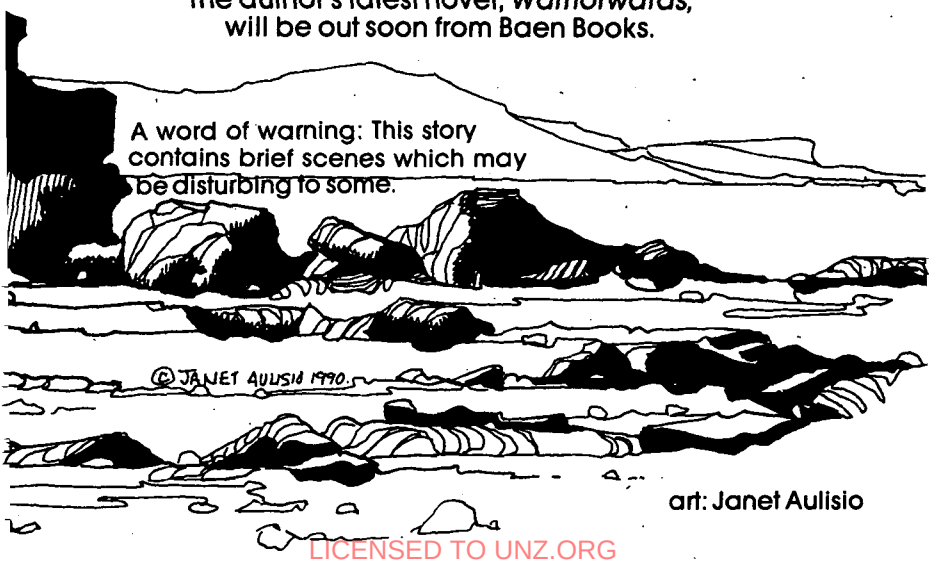
THE COON ROLLED DOWN AND RUPTURED HIS LARINKS, A SQUEEZED NOVEL BY MR. SKUNK

by Dafydd ab Hugh

In Dafydd ab Hugh's first tale for *IAsfm*, a boy, a dog, and a skunk set out on a courageous quest to bring about Progrets and Democrazy for all. The author's latest novel, *Warriorwards*, will be out soon from Baen Books.



art: Janet Aulisio

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Chapter one we hear the story

I heard the story from an old Coon at first sitting at my favorite place on the hardground just outside the bowl alley on venture path. Then later he and I played chase and bounce with a ball and bounded it on venture path. But the story kept running around and around inside my ears like it was casting for a scent so I just had to find out more about it.

So I and the Boy Nik Nok and Disha the Dog and Hanki and Yanki the Cats sat in a circle and I told them each and all about the Hidden Den and the Coon who could not talk:

He lived under the jerryfams next to the bowl alley. He told me by whispers that he had ruptured his larinks. That is his throat where he talks, Disha the Dog said (she is very smart, smarter than me and the others especially Hanki and Yanki). Then the Coon acted out the whole story standing on his back legs to mean human being, staggering to tell me he meant stupid and looking back east so I would know he meant stupid like the fourlegs were before Democrazy.

I put what the Coon said in words as best I could and this, was it:

Across the city and too far for a chase there are humans like before Democrazy and they are all sealed up in a den where no air can go in and out, and the Winds of Law have not blown either.

Inside the den the fourlegs are all stupid like before Democrazy too, and they have to work for the humans and cannot think and have no Inalienable Progrets.

Nobody knew what to say after I finished my story. Disha and Nik Nok always ignore me for they see no real difference between a Skunk and a Cat, except for the white stripe and the odie Skunk of course.

But even I knew something had to be done, so I said "if we love Democrazy then something has to be done."

Chapter two we deleminate the problem

"Well if you love Democrazy and the Winds of Law that made us all Equal then what are we going to do about that den, where there is no Progrets and no Law?"

I was afraid to answer for I knew what the only answer could be and I was only a Skunk!

But I knew I had no choice and neither did Disha and neither even did Nik Nok. He was not of the old Men, the ones who exploded the less fortunate and took advantages. He believed in Democrazy. I had seen him cover his face in the Cord House.

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I looked up at Disha and "this is what we will do about that den" said I, "journey all the way across the city and bring Democrazy and the Will of Progrets to this den of unequity."

Disha squatted and made water on the whitestone trail beside my favorite old den.

"Do you really want to take the trip when you might find the Overizon instead?"

Now I thought for a long time before I answered her. Was there even Democrazy and Equality beyond the venture path? I did not know even though I always thought Progrets had spread it everywhere. But after hearing the old Coon's tale I wondered.

"These humans are trying to stop the spread of Democrazy that Progrets started when it loosed the bug that rode the Winds of Law and did us all" I said and I thought I had said a mouthful.

"But will you go" she asked like Fiday the teacher coaxing the right answer.

Chapter three some decide to go

I thought quietly, not looking at her. I do not know what made me ask "who will come with me if I go" but it slipped out.

She waited too long and I knew she was afraid too, then she said "if you go I at least will come with you. You must ask the others for yourself."

We gathered the group again and told them what we were going to do to save Democrazy.

The old Coon had said only one thing more to me, in the whisper again for he could not convoy this by gestures. He whispered that this Hidden Den was across the city of angels at the foot of the other mountains, where the underbuild had fallen in.

As soon as Hanki and Yanki heard this, they said there would be wild things along the way, and then they high tailed it out of there as Cats will, for Cats are hardly smarter than before there was Progrets. Only I and Disha and Nik Nok the Boy stayed.

"Is Disha going to go" asked Nik Nok in a strange voice. "Yes" she said for she had already said she at least would go with me. "Then surely I shall go too" he said.

Disha tilted her head as she looked at him. A gleam in her eyes frightened me, being somehow wrong.

"Then there are three of us" she said, and "when shall we start?"

"Let us wait" said I, "let us wait until the shadows are longer. I bow to the Will of Progrets but I hear there is no Democrazy under a hot sun."

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Chapter four off we go then

All too soon the shadows grew, and the hot Santa's Anus blew from the nightside and we had to set out.

We chased the scents between the fallen walls and square builds sometimes running and sometimes walking when old Disha got tired but all the while making way toward the other mountains.

Nik Nok never seemed to tire as Boys will not, but he stayed very near Disha even when she had to rest.

Soon all the smells were strange to me and I could see nothing I knew, it was not the venture path or anywhere I had been before and I was uneasy.

We ran by a fire once. I heard the boom boom boom inside the giant den and I watched until the walls tired and fell in against each other, such is Progrets.

Chapter five we meet death and Democrazy

All at once as the sun rose in the sky like a big burn, Disha stopped and I almost ran into her.

She perked her ears up and snuffled her nose towards the sun but I could not smell anything yet and there was nothing to see but a hill of metal trash and rotwood. "Come on Nik Nok" she said and started to climb through a notch in the hill.

No one called to me, but I followed anyway for I was not about to get left alone in a strange place.

Then I smelled it too, it was a dead Dog in the bottom of the hill, named Duk Duk. I had played chase and bounce with her not long before.

He was dead and he smelled of junk to me.

Disha and Nik Nok stood together at the top of the hill and I could see the Boy did not really understand death yet, for he called out to Duk Duk. Then I smelled his fear as he began to understand.

Disha must have smelled it too for she moved over to put her head against his thigh.

"Do not be afraid Nik Nok" she said "for I will protect you."

"It is not Junkyard Dogs and falling walls that scare me" he said "but I had a funny feeling in my stomach just now. Something bad is going to come of this extra diction. I have never been away from the bowl alley and venture path before."

Disha muzzled his ear softly and licked it.

"Nik Nok you are still too young to fight wars. You go home and I will be back to play with you very soon."

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He put his arms around her neck and "I cannot let you do it alone" he said. "And I am not too young for I became a man a season ago, at night in a dream."

I shivered and looked back at Duk Duk. There were things on him. Every so often his fur would rup and flutter like he itched but it was only the bugs and burrowers who had gotten under his skin. His eyes watched me like they knew something and said "watch us well Skunk, you will come to this in no time yourself!"

Nik Nok and Disha held each other for a little bit, and they ignored me. But I watched them with bright Skunk eyes. I had began to know in words what was happening between them. It was not Democrazy, Democrazy was what lay in the ditch with Duk Duk.

Chapter six the watcher in the dark

About this time I prickled like we were being watched. I looked around but nothing and I decided I was jumpy being so far from the venture path. I said nothing but "please you two let us go."

We walked for a long time until it was full, comfortable dark and cold in the moon.

At last Disha decided we should stop for the night, but it was more for Nik Nok I think than for me. "We are far away from bowl alley and there are marauders here" she said. I saw a hole across the hardground beneath writing words and I told her. "It says exon" she said.

Disha investigated the hole first because she was the leader. It smelled like Rats and burn-juice. She had me ask them if it was alright if we stayed there for a mome, and they said they would ask their king.

Chapter seven we all eat Cat food

We left them to deleminate and stalked out like mighty hunters in search of food. I still had that same watchy feeling but I was too unsure to tell Disha yet.

I let them in front and stayed behind as quiet as I could. Disha scented the air and cast about for something edible and catchable. We were away from the bowl alley so I knew anyone we caught we could eat (except not a Dog or a Boy or a Skunk of course).

Nik Nok saw something before Disha smelled it, a flash of white on top of a wall on the other side of the hardground and we began to stalk.

We sneaked from build to fall keeping to shadows and picking up our feet so as not to scuff.

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Disha slunk forward and Nik Nok clung to the black fur on her back. But he watched her not the prey, even I could see that. He watched her hard muscles flex and stretch beneath her sleek fur and watched her slink lower and lower to the ground invisible in the dark as the Winds of Law.

I listened. Skunks can listen well. I heard Nik Nok's breath catch in his throat as he felt her body beneath his hand. I smelled the same smell I make when the lady Skunks come into season.

When we got across the hardground "split to the left and drive it towards me" Disha snuffled to Nik Nok. I crept away from them both and poked my head around the corner.

It was a Cat fat and lazy licking himself, full and stuffed and paying no tensions to Progrets and the bitter world.

Clever Nik Nok reached into his bag and found our best ball, took aim and beaned the Cat right where it counts.

At first he flew into the air and screamed out "oh shit," then he began to run for his life with Nik Nok pounding after and me behind them as fast as four Skunk legs could carry me.

"Help! Do not eat me!" the Cat added for good measure but he did not turn around to see if we were agreeable to this suggestion.

We chased him along the wall jumping over the stones and falls for he was fleeing for his very life. He tried to jump up a telephone tree but Nik Nok jumped up after him and he could climbor as well as the Cat and he jumped down again and ran down an alley for he was fleeing for his very life. Nik Nok disappeared after him and at once I heard a snarl and a Cat scream. When I poked an eye around the corner I saw Disha had the Cat cornered against the whitestone at the other end.

"Oh please please do not eat me!" the Cat cried in terror as Disha padded closer. I smelled the water of his fear and saw his eyes wide and wet and almost I asked Disha to seize and desist, for Cats are nearly Skunks. But then I reminated I was hungry.

"Why not eat you" she asked "you are an inferior being, to wit a Cat. Cats are made to be eaten."

"But I have a wife" argued the Cat "and she will have no one to provide for her if I am dead and eaten."

"Oh that is no problem just bring her here, and I shall solve her problem too!" retorted Disha.

The Cat perked up at this suggestion which I would not have thought he would and suggested "very well, just let me go and I shall get her." It seemed a reasonable request except of course I doubted his sincerity in returning, for you can never trust a Cat.

"Not so fast Mr. Dinner" said Disha. "I would not have you tire yourself

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by walking all that way and all the way back. I think it is best if we avoid inconveniencing your wife and just eat you now."

Nik Nok and I had said nothing so far, for Disha was doing well on her own.

"But surely you do not want to deplete the food supply" said the Cat, thinking furiously which is very out of character for a Cat "you should eat the aged and the sick not Cats like me in their prime who can still sire kittens."

"But if we do not eat you then *we* will die and I too can still whelp pups and Nik Nok can now sire children, so he tells me."

"But you must further the cause of Progrets and kill only the Cats who have not become smart."

"That would mean all of you" retorted Disha, thinking no doubt of Hanki and Yanki.

"But surely you are not against Democrazy are you?"

I worried because I reminated the looks that Disha and Nik Nok had given each other lately. But Disha just laughed all the time edging closer to the Cat. The Cat saw this and arched his back and hissed. He was fighting for his very life now.

"If you were stupid enough to get caught" debated Disha "then killing you *is* Progrets!"

"Yes it is eat or be eaten" said Nik Nok.

The Cat could see his situation was now desperate and he tried one last gambol.

"But you should not eat me for we are brothers, we fourlegs must all stick together in the city of the angels."

"So" said Disha with sudden anger "I shall eat you anyway because I am hungry, and that after all is the only real argument." Then she rushed forward and caught the Cat who in the end did not even try to escape for he knew he was a goner.

"Disha" asked Nik Nok, "why *should* we not eat our brothers?"

Chapter eight Democrazy is violented

"Good kill" I said, but nobody heard me. Nik Nok gave Disha a hug that was not entirely innocent I think.

Nik Nok ran his hand gently over Disha is soft fur, and watched with Raccoon eyes as her hard muscles underneath flexed and stretched as she tore and tugged at the Cat, getting him open.

She chewed off a warm hindquarter, hesitated a moment and then laid it in his lap. "Here beautiful" she said "you take the first Cat cut."

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He picked it up slowly, pulled the fur off and sunk his teeth in and tore off a juicy hunk.

I slunk back into the shadows for I realized I was not wanted at this particle mome. But I watched for we Skunks have very good eyes.

He chewed and held his hunk out to Disha, and she ate from the same piece. They looked into each other's eyes and Disha put her paw on Nik Nok's forearm and I heard the Boy panting like he was chasing something invisible.

I was frightened. I knew this was not Democrazy and that the Winds of Law would blow across us for this.

Fresh Cat has an effect, the meat is tangy without dipping it in the black specks and the blood sends a wild hair through the back of your jaw and makes you squint. This time it was dubbly so for the frightened Cat had pushed excitement through his whole body, I could smell it even from where I was. But they hungered for more than food even so.

The Cat blood dripped down Nik Nok's chin and he wiped it with his hand and held it out for Disha to lick. The kill smell was making even me excited, but I stayed in the shadows again for I love Progrets and Democrazy.

He ripped a piece of catsmeat off the leg and offered the next bite to Disha, and moved closer and closer to her. He dipped his finger in the blood and drew a line with it along Disha's head and down her nose.

She licked his finger as he let it trail over her lips and all at once they did not even care about the Cat. They moved a little away and I darted forward and caught a piece. But I watched as I ate and I shivered wondering what the Winds of Law would feel like.

Chapter nine for the strong of heart

Disha began licking his throat and then his chest and his ling began to swell. I smelled the lady Dog smell. Nik Nok was shaking and gasping like he had run a race and Disha turned herself around and knelt her front legs down. "Gently" she said, "slowly do not rush it or you will hurt me."

"I do not know how" said Nik Nok and his voice was thick and white.

"Hold my tail up out of the way. I will tell you if you are doing something wrong." She suddenly caught her breath and held it.

"Does it feel good" she asked him.

"Like nothing I have ever felt and better even than when I used my hand before!" he told her.

"Wait wait" Disha said "it is too tight yet." But then she whined and snuffled and sounded very excited herself, and Nik Nok found the going

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easier. I hoped that they had forgotten I was watching them for I did not want to foul soot—either like the Cat, or even like Disha! For if you start out violenting Democrazy one time why not do anything you want then?

He held the fur on her side with one hand and the going was easier. His other hand kept stroking her tail and rubbing it against his bare belly.

"Does this feel like this always" he asked.

She sighed only "will of Democrazy."

I closed my eyes at the Blast Femmy and listened only. I was reminateing when I had last had a lady, and it was long ago and usually I cannot reminate it, but the scent remimbered me. I lay quiet and listened to Disha and Nik Nok.

The Boy cried out suddenly, not even afraid of a Junkyard Dog hearing him but when afterward he started to pull out she said "do not dare stop! Keep going even if you are finished for I am not."

"But how" he asked "I am not hard anymore." I opened my eyes again because maybe the horror was almost over, and I wanted to see what it looked like when you violented Democrazy.

"Damn you just keep going I am almost there, you are hard enough." So of course he did. At last it happened to Disha too, but she did not cry out as he had. She went stiff all over and her tail stood straight up against his stomach.

He bent over to lay his body against her back and his head on hers and still stayed in her. He licked Disha's ears very gently.

"I have been with many other Dogs before" she said "and you are so much better for you took much more care with me than they do. They are all only interested in pleasuring themselves and something happens and they get big and lumpy and cannot pull out. But that never stops them from trying. They cannot do it slow and gentle like you do." Nik Nok said nothing but he did not look as happy as he might, for perhaps he saw to the future then.

Chapter ten love and Democrazy

"And there is more about you" she added "but I cannot say what it is, the thought of you is like gas that has floated up to my heart and is pushing everything else aside and nearly bursting out my chest."

They held each other as mates. I think they had forgotten all about me and Progrets and the Hidden Den.

"Let is stay here forever Disha" said Nik Nok, "we can do it again as soon as—"

But Disha got a junk look on her face, and she looked at me and I

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almost turned and ran even though she is my friend. She is still a Dog and I only a Skunk, and she is more equal.

I tried to talk but I was too afraid.

"I know that you saw but you cannot talk about what you have just seen" snarled Disha, and all I could do was shake my head. They had violented Democrazy and I was afraid.

Now Nik Nok looked frightened, for he had not thought about the Winds of Law before he foolishly fell in love.

"But why not? Do we not love each the other?"

"Love" sneered Disha, "what does love have to do with the Will of Democrazy? We are cranimals now, for all of our friends on venture path cannot stand the thought of what we have done and it is eat or be eaten. So if this Skunk talks we shall be goners you and I."

I curled up in a ball shaking, meaning I would not say anything and betray my friends to Democrazy and thus I too became victim to the Winds of Law, as you will see at the novel ending.

"Let us stay" said Nik Nok, "and never return to face the bath of Democrazy."

"No beautiful" said Disha to Nik Nok, "for we must eat and go back to today's den. We set out again when the sun sinks. Have you forgotten our quest?"

With a wasteful look he looked down at himself. He had fallen out of her. His ling was still wet from inside Disha and he wiped it with his hand and rubbed some on his nose so he could smell her all the way back.

That is how I found out about love in the streets.

Chapter eleven a junk waffle

When we got back King Rat said it was all right to stay if we gave him some Cat, which we did and then he let us stay the day inside the exon.

It was hot but even so all three of us huddled next to each other. We needed each other's solstice.

So it was that I jumped in fear when I suddenly heard a junk howl from outside, across the hardground and the paths and the metal autobiles that we were going to cross the next day, even towards the other mountains.

The scream scraped like a falling wall and rumbled like thunderbum "damn all of you die horrible!" it said, and then "it is not the Junkyard Dogs what we learned to mean to me!"

It was junk, through and through and I wondered if he would try to

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break into the exon and get us. It was death and dismembrane. It was howls and horrors, junk city, junk waffle, Junkyard Dog!

Soon his howls came closer, and he said things that did not mean anything but fear and death except maybe to another junk: "anyone we caught we could eat once—kill them! Do not let them—I *tore* all living creatures in *piece*!"

In between these cries I heard him run around and around the exon moaning like a cub with stomach rot and coughing like a redstone mountain falling down in an earthshake, and even that made me afraid and by the way they shivered I knew Disha and Nik Nok were too. You never know what these Junkyard Dogs will do for they are mad and do not drink water and if they bite you you become junk yourself.

We heard each curly nailed paw tickity-tickity scrabbing the hardground, round and round and round until it was as if brats were throwing stones, bounding chinks of redstone in a circle to pen us inside.

Then "I held onto the fur on hunks of metal!" he suddenly hissed from right beneath our windrow!

We got up as quiet as we could and crouched by the door because he might smell us and try to get in at us. I had even heard of a Junkyard Dog leaping straight through a glass windrow! for after all they cannot feel pain, being junk anyway and outside Democrazy.

Something tugged at my mind about some of the things he said. Then, when he sang like a jay from just underneath the windrow "not so fast, Mr. Dinner!" I knew what I reminated.

The junk things he said were our own words turned, like a poison snake into something other, frightful.

The junk had been stalking us and listening the whole time. My watchy feeling had been true.

We listened hard and tried to track him as he trotted around and around crazily, but the Winds of Law and the Santa's Anus kept howling too and knocking things over so it was hard to tell which was which.

There was too much to see in the exon. There were tables and broken windrows and spilled blackoil, and three very frightened Dogs Boys and Skunks slunking around trying to watch and listen at each and every windrow.

We strained and looked but he never stepped out and showed himself. Of course we imagined he was everywhere and sometimes it even seemed he was here in the exon with us, but it always turned out to be just one of the three of us knocking something over.

Then a thump on the roof and "my favorite place, the hardgrover moon!" he croaked from above.

We all fell to silence and held our collectivist breaths.

I for one could hear the junk panting and wheezing on the roof. Slowly

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he walked to one side, tickity-tickity. Slowly he walked back, scritchity-scritchity, tickity—and *stopped.*

"I know you" he whispered, so clear we could hear the hair stand on our backs. "Anyone we caught we could eat *once*" he added, so quiet we could hear pieces and drips of junk spatter on the metal roof.

Then with a terrible creak like the roof caving in and dropping him there among us, he leaped and was gone. There was a frightful bulge, left there in the roof right in the middle of the den.

I do not know how long we stayed up and shivered but we never heard anything more from him that day.

Chapter twelve Law and Custom

We made good time towards the other mountains and climbored over many crickley hills of autobiles and metals. We were so tired that after we found a dead Rat and ate lunch we were too beat to even play chase and bounce with our other ball, and we plodded again as soon as we had swallowed our food.

I kept listening hard for the Junkyard Dog but either he had decided to let us alone which I doubted or he was very, very good at stalking.

I was afraid it was the latter. None of us heard anything we could say was surely him but many a scrape and click that could have been his flank against a wall, and could have been his claws on top an unbroken piece of hardground but could have been anything else either.

My feeling was stronger than ever. We were all uneasy but could not sit around worrying about a Junkyard Dog so we tried to ignore him and run on.

I knew that Disha and Nik Nok wanted to be alone so I kept my distance. I listened though, for a Skunk has good ears. Mostly I listened for the Junkyard Dog but I heard every word that Disha said to Nik Nok, or vice verses.

Disha said that even though everybody is all for Democrazy nobody agrees what it is, so we hide what we think for fear we will be too different and become company dinner, and this is Custom. Even back before there was Law to enforce the will of Democrazy there was Custom, and Custom is stronger even than Law.

I kept hoping they would both see the light and allow Custom and Progrets to get in the way of animal love.

Custom says we can eat only what we can eat and that we cannot love anybody who is too different. If you break Custom, it is company dinner for you, boy, just like happened to Taggo. But his violentation provided us with a lovely feast, so you see what goes around comes around and

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Progrets is always satisfied. This is some of what the two of them said, Disha and Nik Nok:

"What love can this be" he said "when we can never be together with friends, and cannot make children?"

But she said "I have made many pups already and the last thing I need now is more when I cannot always feed what I have."

He said "but does this love violent Democrazy? What will happen to us?"

She said "sometimes two people that can touch each other are more important than the Custom of Democrazy, for love itself *is* Progrets and even Democrazy must obey."

She said "before the plague that did us all there was hardly any love. Love can only live between equals. Back then everyone was either lesser or greater than everyone else so how could there be true love? Now there is perfect equality and Democrazy and we can finally love."

But as Disha said this last I thought I heard the ghost of a sour chasm, for she knew as well as did I what Democrazy would think of her love for Nik Nok.

He said "what is love really?" I thought Disha would answer because she is wise and a Dog but she just walked on, thinking.

At last I could not keep my silence, and I answered for her what my mother had heard from a Zoocamel long ago:

I said "love is knowing each other like worms know the dead."

Disha stopped. "That is pretty good for a Skunk" she admitted and said "this cannot happen when one is more than the other, because how can the lesser know the greater? And how can the greater respect one who is less than she?"

Nik Nok asked "is this how it was before the plague that did us all?"

Chapter thirteen Disha has a tail

"In the days before the plague" she said "the Dogs could not talk or even think, and neither could the other animals. This I know, this I know. Men were all that were intelly and they were even more intelly than the Dogs and Men are now. They set about to make some of the fourlegs intelly too."

"Some say" she said "they only wanted servants and they could not use each other as they always had because of Servile Rights, but I have always admired the early Men and I prefer to think they truly believed we should all be crated equally. This I know, this I know."

"In any case" she said "they did it, and they did it by crating an

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unnatural plague that would do us, Dogs and Cats and other mamuals. This I know, this I know."

"I am not sure what a plague is" asked Nik Nok, and I listened hard for I had never understood that explanation either as often as Disha had shown this tail.

"A plague is a little bug that crawls into every bump and hole in your body" she admitted. "Whenever you get sick that is caused by these bugs, and that is a plague."

"Anyway, they deliberately fected some of us Dogs with this plague and then sat back on their haunches to see what would develop. This I know, this I know."

"And this is where Progrets and Democrazy came from" whispered the Boy out of rivulance.

"What developed" she smugged "is that one of these plague Dogs escaped. The men were not as smart as they thought and Fang the Savor got away with the plague bug still fecting him."

"This I know, this I know" said both I and Nik Nok at once.

"The Dogs were first and then next the plague fected the Rats and the Skunks and the Coons and the Zoomals and everything else. The Cats were last for they were always so full of themselves licking their body that they kept licking the bugs right off until they wised up! And that is why Dogs are first and Cats are last and all others fall in between."

"This I know, this I know" we supplied for her.

I had forgotten all about the Junkyard Dog, so intent was on I Disha's tail.

"Ah but Men are a different story" she continued finally. "For the rest of us it was a climb up the hill for more intelly, but the Men had the easy route and came down the hill backwards. We met Democrazically in the middle, for the plague has finally made us *all* equal . . . the furries and birds and scales and frogs and even some of the fish, who are getting more intelly all of the time."

"Until at last today" she whispered "when I can love you truly as my grandmother could never love your grandfather. This I know, Nik Nok. This I know."

"What is the use of more intelly" asked Nik Nok angrily "if the Old Men did not have love? I am *glad* for this plague even if I *am* stupider than men were before! I am glad for our love Disha."

She stopped and bit at a flea on her hind leg for a mome.

"Even" she snuffled "if you can no longer understand the things of Men?"

"Things?"

"The autobiles and the glass mountains, the redstone dens, the hard-

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ground, telephone trees, walls and builds and all? If you can no longer understand them?"

"Then" he said "they are not the things of men anymore" and there he had her.

Chapter fourteen our junk fears are real eyes

"These things of men are not any of them as warm and pretty and furry as you" said Nik Nok and I began to get an easy because here again was love against Democrazy.

"You will not always have me" Disha warned "Dogs do not live as long as men do for that is something the plague did not change."

"I am here now" he said "and you too and what is tomorrow? Maybe I will die first if that Junkyard Dog is still shuddowing us."

I wondered which was worth more, love or Progrets and I could feel my tail raise in horror. Is wonder a crime against Democrazy?

Then all at once I heard a sound I must have been listening for all day and dreading, a rumbling cough like a redstone mountain falling down in an earthshake, a moaning like a cub with stomach rot and out of the shuddows of a heap of dead cars staggered the Junkyard Dog in the flesh, what was left of it!

All three of us froze in terror and I felt urine trickle down my leg. I also raised my tail and sprayed my wad but I doubted the Junkyard Dog would care about how he smelled as long as he got to bite us, all three!

He staggered forward stiff-legged and I thought, maybe he is already dead but does not know it yet.

In little sharp words he said "you might think my sex will eat me . . . and the part of her I was in squeezed Democrazy."

"Go away" Disha said with tried authority, but "I am who I have been and can eat once anybody I have caught" answered the Junkyard Dog.

"Go away!" I whimpered for I cold not find my voice. I felt like the silent Coon.

"If you were stupid enough you *is* Progrets" said he.

And with that he lunged at us and we three broke in all four directions and I ran up a wall of dead autobiles before I even knew it was blocking. Then I looked back and saw Disha. She had frozen in fear and could not move and she stood nose to nose with the Junkyard Dog who was dripping white at the mouth. I do not know why she did not run or why he had not bitten her yet. I shivered in fear.

But then I heard a cranky squeak and Nik Nok rose from the build he had hidden behind. He found his voice and charged the Junkyard Dog screaming like a Commonest.

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It broke the spell. Disha unfroze and bolted away but oddly the Junkyard Dog did not charge the Boy instead and tear him to shreds like I thought, he turned instead and with a deaf move slashed Disha as she ran by. She screamed and skittered away but I could see the blood flowing from her hind leg. The junk ran in circles three times laughing like a falling pile of autobiles.

Disha shook, tail between her legs. Nik Nok only stared, his face the color of my stripe. We all knew what would happen to her now.

"Well if I am already bit" said she sounding strange and quiet and queerly calm "then you can no longer frighten me, Junk. This I know, this I know." And she leapt upon him as if she were junk herself and they fought tearing and biting and the Junkyard Dog had the worst of it for Disha tore off his ear and opened up his throat.

He fell to his knees and still had mind enough to submit but he was a goner anyway. My throat lumped, because I knew Disha was a goner too. Worse, she would finally be like him and might even bite me then too or Nik Nok. I knew she would never allow that to happen, but there was only one thing that could stop it and that was the Duk Duk path.

The Junk fell over on his side and now blood was flowing out of his throat in spurts so I knew she had struck paydirt. But just for a moment his eyes seemed to clear a little and he raised his head with a big strain and said "that hurt. You are bigger than I suggested. Knelt—knelt her front legs into the pocket of my clothes."

Then "the truck is the key. Hold my tail up out of conveniencing my wife and putting it in. If machines make the wall only machines can onetwothree-one. Against the will of Del so wet."

His voice became weaker and he whispered "keep going even if you are finished, then we will, die. At first, even I could, at first, both our hearts, need meat. Even I, the rules must roll, even I, could hear my life, with me, pounding after."

"Cats" he croaked "are made just outside the bowl. But the truck is the key, you must understand. I smell onions."

Then all at once he pulled himself up as if he had not even been mauled, he looked at us and shrugged and explained "*anyone* we caught we could eat once." Then he settled back with a sigh and moved no more, for he was gone.

Chapter fifteen where Democrazy gets it in the end

We watched him for a long time to make sure he would not pop back up again and say something or maybe bite someone else but he was permanently dead. We moved on without spirit.

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We found a den-hole among the dead autobiles that was empty after we chased out a scrawny Cat. Nik Nok made a halfheart grab and missed but we did not miss it, none of us was hungry anyway. I was still full from the night before, and the way Disha looked I did not even ask her if she wanted the Cat so he got lucky that night. After we settled in I shrunked farther back in the pile so Disha and her love could be alone together.

She was quiet as though submitting but the way she held her head seemed more like quiet domination. She knew she was horribly dead because the Junkyard Dog draw blood.

"Nik Nok" she said "you know we have only a little time left together now. Let us not waste it."

Skunks have very good eyes.

They violented Democrazy again in the day-heat, but this time it was gentle and slow like the black river instead of laughing and plunging like a waterfoul. She licked his belly very lightly and he breathed into her ear and stroked the underside of her tail and when he went inside her she coughed in surprise that it was so smooth and easy. Once he forgot and grabbed her wounded and stiffening leg to pull himself in deeper and she jerked away, but she never made a sound except right at the very end when she moaned just a little. This time she finished before he did but she was true to her word and kept on until he was done.

Afterward they lay together and talked without words while Nik Nok picked fleas out of her fur. They slept face to face even though she being a Dog was not exactly built for it.

Now that I knew what Nik Nok would soon lose I found I no longer cared about Custom and let Democrazy be hanged. Love *is* Progrets. Strange creatures fluttered in my stomach.

As the sun set we rose. When the air became stullen, and we resumed our journey I began to wish Nik Nok had nabbed the cat afterall. The stullen air was even browner than yestereve and blood red with the setting sun so it would be hard to main train a course for the other mountains across the city of angels. Disha said we would be there by the dawn's oily light, and could the underbuild be far away then?

Chapter sixteen we explore Disha's tunnel of love

Well we were not at the mountains by sun-up but we kept at our quest even through the daylight for we were tired, and wanted it all over. We saw no more Junkyard Dogs but my funny-watchy feeling continued, and I felt like everyone we saw was Junk in some way or another.

Finally through the cracked and fallen builds, Disha spied the arch

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with the folded arms that reprehented an underbuild. "We shall enter sex the line here" said she "and follow it along towards the sea that swallows the sun. Soon we shall find the fallen underbuild and thence the hidden den."

So down we went and into the stingy in blackness.

It swallowed us both and three but I felt no comfort, for this was not a den nor a hidey-hole but a build—a build of men and it reeked of them and their Undemocrazy. In some places I found a cold metal road and ran along it for a way, but the ticking of my claws against the hardmetal sent shivers through us all and Disha asked me to walk on the grabble to the side. I was happy to oblige for to tell the truth, I did not like the sound either and even Nik Nok cast his eyes down and grew silent at the echoes. We walked for a passing in silence but I cannot say how long for there are no momes in the dark.

Chapter seventeen we find the hidden den at last!

The journey through the wendless tunnel passed an easily, for even the Santa's Anus and the Winds of Law could not brush us down there. At last we began to see cracks of light in the overhead, and then whole pocks of hardground and finally we discovered the Great Buildfall that the Coon had reminated. We climbored out of the underbuild into bright and treacherous sunlight, and saw stretched down below us the last defense against Democrazy.

It was a build squat like a stone spider and it was all gleaming, while the other builds around it were broken and dulled. There were men in strange clothing outside: they wore thick brown clothes that covered them completely and round hats that surrounded their heads and they looked out of glass windrows in their hats. I did not need for Disha to tell me that the clothes were meant to keep out Progrets but she did anyway. When I objected she said that she had only been telling Nik Nok.

We watched them for a long time. When they went inside two big doors opened for them, but they opened into a little room that did not seem worth the efforts.

"So how do we get Progrets beyond those doors" Disha asked.

"Maybe we can knock a hole through them" asked Nik Nok, but Disha injected. "We might be able to dig our way through one door if we were quick enough, but long before we got through the other door those men would do us. But maybe there is only one wall, perhaps we should consecrate on that."

We crept forward and studied the build some more.

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"Nik Nok" said Disha "if these humans have never been fected by Progrets, that means these walls have stood for many seasons. They must be very strong walls indeed for there have been earthshakes and many storms."

I tried watching the men (or were they women? I could not tell inside their clothing). I began to have a glimmering in my mind like moonlight on the water.

Something the Junkyard Dog said kept buzzing to be reminated, but I could not pull it out and look at it.

The den was in a deep canyon from our vintage point with a long path of mostly straight unbroken hardground leading down towards it. It was to this path that my eyes looked. It had something to do with the important thing the Junkyard Dog said that I could not reminate. Oh how I wished I were a Dog or a Man, that could reminate everything!

"Let us explore the path" I asked "and see if we can find anything." Since neither Disha nor Nik Nok had a better suggestion we turned about and began walking back along the hardground away from the hidden den.

I looked at everything we passed trying to reminate what I knew was in my mind. I reminated, that the Junkyard Dog in between all his gibbers had said something that would help us now.

Chapter eighteen we discover the key to the mysteries

I looked at an arco and a hydrant and a lot of square builds and a store but none of them joggled my memory.

And then I saw the autobile truck and at once the thought leapt back into my mind

"I reminate!" I cried "the truck is the key said the Junkyard Dog!"

Disha looked at the truck and then at me, saying "that is what *I* am now, a Junkyard Dog." At once I regretted my hasty words but "you are right, I reminate him saying that too" she added.

"But what could he know about today" I asked "for you killed him yesterday."

"To the junk" she said "there is no yesterday or tomorrow, it sees backward and forward in days the way we see left and right along venture path. But what does that mean, the truck is the key?"

It was the biggest autobile truck I had ever seen. Even Nik Nok could not reach its top and it had more wheels than there are numbers in the city of angels. It was stopped along the edge of the hardground and was covered with foul-smelling rust.

For a long time we all three stared at the truck trying to figure out

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how it was the key. Then Nik Nok whispered "if machines make the wall then maybe machines can . . ."

"Can what" I asked.

"That was something else he said" said the Boy. "Only machines can what, break the wall?"

"If we could get the truck rolling down the hardground" Disha said think loud "maybe it would roll fast enough that it could smash through the wall and into the Den."

Nik Nok looked at the autobile for a long time.

"It is a very big truck" he said at last.

"But how do we get it rolling" I asked.

"And more important" asked Nik Nok "once we do how do we make sure it stays on the hardground and does not hit a tree and stop?"

"That wheel in front of the chair makes it go left and right" answered Disha like a know-all "for I have spoken with Hanaka Tag the eldest and she told me of these autobiles."

"Well I think these men make the machine come alive" retorted Nik Nok "do you know how to bring it to life also?"

"We do not need to" Disha though she did not sound too sure and I could tell she was only guessing "for if we can get it rolling then the hill will make it go fast enough."

I kept my mouth shut during this axe change, for I am only a Skunk. I listened well though for we Skunks have very good ears.

Nik Nok fumbled with the latch until he could get the metal open and we looked inside.

"What we must do" said Disha "is get it rolling and then one of us stays inside to turn the hoop-wheel and make the truck go left and right to stay on the hardground."

"But then what" asked Nik Nok, full of frights and astonishments "what will happen when it hits the Den? Will I be killed?"

Disha smiled. "Whichever one of us it is in the truck must jump clear before the crash my love." She touched his side gently with her greying muzzle, for she was not as young as she had been the season before.

The truck was not rolling so we decided something was blocking it. After we ran around for a few momes looking Disha saw some pieces of wood under the wheels. We tried to pull them out, but even Nik Nok could not so he knocked them out finally with a rock. The truck ground and groaned but still did not roll. We climbored up to look, and there were lots of metal pulls.

"One of these must be what makes the truck stop and go" announced Disha, but I think she put on more show of know-all then she really had. Nik Nok began pulling and pushing on the pulls, and Disha was vindulated because when he pulled a partically hard one the truck screamed

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and began to roll slowly. It rolled down the hill warbling like a broken thunderbum.

Nik Nok was afraid even when it went so slow. Then it picked up speed and we all shivered.

I was so frightened I could not move and I feared I would not be able to jump out, when the time came being so frightened.

Disha had Nik Nok turn the hoop-wheel, for she did not have the strength in her jaws and it was almost too hard for him!

"Reminate my love" she cautioned "keep the door from latching for we must be ready to fly out at the very last mome."

Nik Nok touched her paw and looked into her eyes, "oh I love you so *much*" he said with a tear in his eye. I could not figure out why his eyes were wet. Was there dust in them?

The autobile truck got faster and faster and soon Nik Nok was barely able to keep it on the hardground and away from trees and builds. I began to be afraid and sick as if I had eaten wormroot when I looked to the side and saw the world whizzing past me faster than a sparrow flies, and almost would have jumped out right then except that I knew Disha would not let us be killed, especially not Nik Nok. She rested her muzzle against his ear, and I could barely hear her snuffle "You are precious to me too. Life is precious."

Then we roared around the last turn with Nik Nok straining to make the hoop-wheel turn so that the autobile truck would stay where it was supposed. We were heading right for the Den.

Some of the Men saw us coming and ran out waiving their hands and then tried to ride their own autobile into our path. They must have known what we were doing and were ready to give their lives to thwart the will of Democrazy, such was their fear of Progrets. But their autobile could not run fast enough and it only hit the back of the truck and did not even turn us. Just before we hit Disha snuffled "junk bonds, but love is stronger." Then "NOW!" she barked "JUMP NOW!"

Nik Nok pushed open the door and just before he jumped he grabbed me by the scruff and saved my life!

We were lucky we were on grass and not on hardground for we hit and hit hard. I rolled over and over the Boy and ended up on my back watching the truck plow into the Den.

I do not know if Disha ever had a chance. Just before the crash I saw her still in the truck, gripping the hoop with her mouth and keeping the truck aimed true.

Then I heard a thunderbum like I had never imagined and the whole wall of the Last Old Den caved in like a buildfall in an earthshake. We had opened the last remnant of yesterday to the clouds of Progrets and the plague.

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Chapter nineteen

But Disha was dead.

Chapter twenty triumph of Democrazy

I was still shaking from the fall I thought. I looked about unable to move, but I could not see Nik Nok and I was alone.

I saw the truck went much deeper into the Den than I imagined, it went right through three rooms.

Dust and smoke puffed on the Winds of Law around inside and in and out of the hole we had made and I knew that the bugs of Democrazy were drifting in too and would bear fruit.

Now all of us would be truly equal and the fourlegs would be liberated.

Then I saw Disha.

She had been thrown from the truck. She lay on the ground covered in blood.

Nik Nok held her broken lifeless body in his arms and tried to kiss her back to life, and the tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"What is this? What is this" he asked touching the salty water.

"I think that means you are a Man again" I said "for Democrazy has triumphed. Our brethren and sistern are free and equal now."

But a junk voice in my head, maybe Disha's ghost whispered "you cannot be both."

Disha pulled me into the Hidden Den, deeper and deeper than we had been even in the underbuild for it was a darkness of the heart not of the air and her ghost glowed like the moon.

I saw a Rat shivering and shaking and looking at me with wide eyes. "We have come to liberate you" I said to resure him, but he only made a scrittering sound and ran away.

I stopped in panic. What was that sound? What did he say?

Then a Dog came out and I called to him, for he was a brother of Disha and I wanted to tell him of her sacrifice and how he was free now.

"You are free Mr. Dog" I said, and "the free live free, you must go out into the City of Angels now and learn the Will of Democrazy."

At first he snarled, but I knew he was only reacting to a strange Skunk. But when he heard my words he settled down and began to moan in pleasure at his newfound equality.

But then the moans turned into a whimper and he crawled on his belly to me. I backed up in consarnation for what was he, to wit a Dog doing playing subservant to a mere Skunk? Where was his equality before the Winds of Law?

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Then I smelled his fear.

It ran unchecked down his leg and I could hear his heart racing like the truck that brought him Democrazy in the first place. He was terrified and did not understand.

"You would do well to buck up and be a Dog" I chastised "for this is Progrets and the Will of Democrazy!" I boldly approached to lead him out into the real world, but instead he barked . . . and it was not words he barked. It was a cough, a grunt and held no more meaning than fear and confusion.

He may have been a Dog, but he was still only an animal. He was no brother of Disha.

We turned and ran at the same time in opposite directions. Terror gripped me too, for I suddenly realized that I was in another land.

There was no Democrazy here today, no matter what the bugs may say tomorrow and I was more afraid than I had been of the Junkyard Dog.

A Man stood in my path. "Do not stop me" I announced "for I am Progrets!"

He screamed and staggered back against the wall of the Den covering his face. Another man heard me and tried to bean me with a stick crying "another one, kill him! Break his throat like the other!" and I did not need to ask to know that they meant the Coon. Now I knew how he had come to rupture his larinks. I ran like a Commonest.

At once the whole Den came alive against me, Men and Fourlegs and it was I who was fleeing for my very life. I found the hole, I do not know how. And then I was through. I did not stop running until I found the fallen underbuild again, and there was Nik Nok. But Disha's body was not with him and he would not tell me where it was.

Chapter twenty-one to the winners go the spoiled

I will not tell you of the journey back across the waste, to the venture path with Nik Nok carrying me under one arm. All I reminate is that the Dogs snarled fiercely and the builds rumbled and shook, but none of them could touch us for Disha trotted right beside us still, and her laugh echoed around us as we slept the day away.

By the night we returned the color finally crept back into Nik Nok's face, and he could smile though he vanished the next day and I never saw him again.

When I knew he had gone Overizon I felt a tear in my eye. I, the last of our extra diction, learned to cry.

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Chapter twenty-two Mr. Skunk lowers his tale

I have nothing left to say. I am getting old and soon I will be a feast myself if you can stand the smell.

I, a Skunk am the very last of us who is able to cry since Nik Nok left and Disha died. I see you do not even understand what it is, except perhaps dust in my eye or a thorn in my paw.

In the high build at the end of venture path is a tower with a bell at the top, but it is silent now for there are none with the will to ring it. Pigeons roost under the metal and I hear them call to each other through the long, hot days: "home! Fly home! Come home!"

They know nothing else to say, but it is a miracle that they can say even that, and I think that the plague is finally doing them as well. I think this means that soon we shall be equal to the pigeons too and only able to call each other home without even knowing where our home lies.

That is true Democrazy after all, and there is an end to love.

I will not be there to see, thank Democrazy.

Long reign Progrets! I bow to the Will, the Winds and Inalienable Progrets!

I confess that sometimes I wonder: have we lost something urgent? But I do not think wondering should be a crime against Democrazy. ●

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Eighteen years old, October eleventh

Drunk for the first time in her life,
she tossed her head in a horsy laugh
and that new opal gift sailed off her sore earlobe,
in a graceful parabola,
pinged twice on the stone porch floor,
and rolled off to hide behind the rose bushes.

It gathered dust and silt for two centuries.
The mansion came down in a war.

For twelve thousand years
the opal hid in dark rubble, unmoving.
An arctic chill worked down through it, and deeper,
and glaciers pushed the rubble thousands of miles,
very fast, as opals measure time.

After millions of years (the Sun just measurably cooler)
a female felt the presence of a stone,
and waved away yards of snow and ice;
waved away dozens of yards
of frozen dirt and crushed rock,
and held, in what resembled a hand,
this bauble of gold and rainbow stone:

felt the sense of loss in that silly girl,
dead as a trilobite;
felt the pain that had gone into penetrating
the soft hyperbolic paraboloid of cartilage
that then displayed the decoration;
felt its sexual purpose:
to attract a dissimilar pattern of genes
to combine and recombine a trillion trillion times,
and become herself.

She briefly cherished the stone,
and returned it to its waiting.

—Joe Haldeman

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Bear's Discovery

by Lindy Burnett

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I was driving with my brother, the preacher, and my nephew, the preacher's son, on I-65 just north of Bowling Green when we got a flat. It was Sunday night and we had been to visit Mother at the Home. We were in my car. The flat caused what you might call knowing groans since, as the old-fashioned one in my family (so they tell me), I fix my own tires, and my brother is always telling me to get radials and quit buying old tires.

But if you know how to mount and fix tires yourself, you can pick them up for almost nothing.

Since it was a left rear tire, I pulled over left, onto the median grass. The way my Caddy stumbled to a stop, I figured the tire was ruined. "I guess there's no need asking if you have any of that *FlatFix* in the trunk," said Wallace.

"Here, son, hold the light," I said to Wallace Jr. He's old enough to want to help and not old enough (yet) to think he knows it all. If I'd married and had kids, he's the kind I'd have wanted.

An old Caddy has a big trunk that tends to fill up like a shed. Mine's a '56. Wallace was wearing his Sunday shirt, so he didn't offer to help while I pulled magazines, fishing tackle, a wooden tool box, some old clothes, a comealong wrapped in a grass sack, and a tobacco sprayer out of the way, looking for my jack. The spare looked a little soft.

The light went out. "Shake it, son," I said.

It went back on. The bumper jack was long gone, but I carry a little ¼ ton hydraulic. I finally found it under Mother's old *Southern Livings,* 1978–1986. I had been meaning to drop them at the dump. If Wallace hadn't been along, I'd have let Wallace Jr. position the jack under the axle, but I got on my knees and did it myself. There's nothing wrong with a boy learning to change a tire. Even if you're not going to fix and mount them, you're still going to have to change a few in this life. The light went off again before I had the wheel off the ground. I was surprised at how dark the night was already. It was late October and beginning to get cool. "Shake it again, son," I said.

It went back on but it was weak. Flickery.

"With radials you just don't *have* flats," Wallace explained in that voice he uses when he's talking to a number of people at once; in this case, Wallace Jr. and myself. "And even when you *do,* you just squirt them with this stuff called *FlatFix* and you just drive on. $3.95 the can."

"Uncle Bobby can fix a tire hisself," said Wallace Jr., out of loyalty I presume.

"*Him*self," I said from halfway under the car. If it was up to Wallace, the boy would talk like what Mother used to call "a helock from the gorges of the mountains." But drive on radials.

"Shake that light again," I said. It was about gone. I spun the lugs off

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into the hubcap and pulled the wheel. The tire had blown out along the sidewall. "Won't be fixing this one," I said. Not that I cared. I have a pile as tall as a man out by the barn.

The light went out again, then came back better than ever as I was fitting the spare over the lugs. "Much better," I said. There was a flood of dim orange flickery light. But when I turned to find the lug nuts, I was surprised to see that the flashlight the boy was holding was dead. The light was coming from two bears at the edge of the trees, holding torches. They were big, three-hundred pounders, standing about five feet tall. Wallace Jr. and his father had seen them and were standing perfectly still. It's best not to alarm bears.

I fished the lug nuts out of the hubcap and spun them on. I usually like to put a little oil on them, but this time I let it go. I reached under the car and let the jack down and pulled it out. I was relieved to see that the spare was high enough to drive on. I put the jack and the lug wrench and the flat into the trunk. Instead of replacing the hubcap, I put it in there too. All this time, the bears never made a move. They just held the torches up, whether out of curiosity or helpfulness, there was no way of knowing. It looked like there may have been more bears behind them, in the trees.

Opening three doors at once, we got into the car and drove off. Wallace was the first to speak. "Looks like bears have discovered fire," he said.

When we first took Mother to the Home, almost four years (forty-seven months) ago, she told Wallace and me she was ready to die. "Don't worry about me, boys," she whispered, pulling us both down so the nurse wouldn't hear. "I've drove a million miles and I'm ready to pass over to the other shore. I won't have long to linger here." She drove a consolidated school bus for thirty-nine years. Later, after Wallace left, she told me about her dream. A bunch of doctors were sitting around in a circle discussing her case. One said, "We've done all we can for her, boys, let's let her go." They all turned their hands up and smiled. When she didn't die that fall, she seemed disappointed, though as spring came she forgot about it, as old people will.

In addition to taking Wallace and Wallace Jr. to see Mother on Sunday nights, I go myself on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I usually find her sitting in front of the TV, even though she doesn't watch it. The nurses keep it on all the time. They say the old folks like the flickering. It soothes them down.

"What's this I hear about bears discovering fire?" she said on Tuesday. "It's true," I told her as I combed her long white hair with the shell comb Wallace had bought her from Florida. Monday there had been a story in the Louisville *Courier-Journal,* and Tuesday one on NBC or CBS

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Nightly News. People were seeing bears all over the state, and in Virginia as well. They had quit hibernating, and were apparently planning to spend the winter in the medians of the interstates. There have always been bears in the mountains of Virginia, but not here in western Kentucky, not for almost a hundred years. The last one was killed when Mother was a girl. The theory in the *Courier-Journal* was that they were following I-65 down from the forests of Michigan and Canada, but one old man from Allen County (interviewed on nationwide TV) said that there had always been a few bears left back in the hills, and they had come out to join the others now that they had discovered fire.

"They don't hibernate any more," I said. "They make a fire and keep it going all winter."

"I declare," Mother said. "What'll they think of next!" The nurse came to take her tobacco away, which is the signal for bedtime.

Every October, Wallace Jr. stays with me while his parents go to camp. I realize how backward that sounds, but there it is. My brother is a minister (House of the Righteous Way, Reformed), but he makes two thirds of his living in real estate. He and Elizabeth go to a Christian Success Retreat in South Carolina, where people from all over the country practice selling things to one another. I know what it's like not because they've ever bothered to tell me, but because I've seen the Revolving Equity Success Plan ads late at night on TV.

The schoolbus let Wallace Jr. off at my house on Wednesday, the day they left. The boy doesn't have to pack much of a bag when he stays with me. He has his own room here. As the eldest of our family, I hung onto the old home place near Smiths Grove. It's getting run down, but Wallace Jr. and I don't mind. He has his own room in Bowling Green, too, but since Wallace and Elizabeth move to a different house every three months (part of the Plan), he keeps his .22 and his comics, the stuff that's important to a boy his age, in his room here at the home place. It's the room his dad and I used to share.

Wallace Jr. is twelve. I found him sitting on the back porch that overlooks the interstate when I got home from work. I sell crop insurance.

After I changed clothes, I showed him how to break the bead on a tire two ways, with a hammer and by backing a car over it. Like making sorghum, fixing tires by hand is a dying art. The boy caught on fast, though. "Tomorrow I'll show you how to mount your tire with the hammer and a tire iron," I said.

"What I wish is I could see the bears," he said. He was looking across the field to I-65, where the northbound lanes cut off the corner of our field. From the house at night, sometimes the traffic sounds like a waterfall.

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"Can't see their fire in the daytime," I said. "But wait till tonight." That night CBS or NBC (I forget which is which) did a special on the bears, which were becoming a story of nationwide interest. They were seen in Kentucky, West Virginia, Missouri, Illinois (southern), and, of course, Virginia. There have always been bears in Virginia. Some characters there were even talking about hunting them. A scientist said they were heading into the states where there is some snow but not too much, and where there is enough timber in the medians for firewood. He had gone in with a video camera, but his shots were just blurry figures sitting around a fire. Another scientist said the bears were attracted by the berries on a new bush that grew only in the medians of the interstates. He claimed this berry was the first new species in recent history, brought about by the mixing of seeds along the highway. He ate one on TV, making a face, and called it a "newberry." A climatic ecologist said that the warm winters (there was no snow last winter in Nashville, and only one flurry in Louisville) had changed the bears' hibernation cycle, and now they were able to remember things from year to year. "Bears may have discovered fire centuries ago," he said, "but forgot it." Another theory was that they had discovered (or remembered) fire when Yellowstone burned, several years ago.

The TV showed more guys talking about bears than it showed bears, and Wallace Jr. and I lost interest. After the supper dishes were done I took the boy out behind the house and down to our fence. Across the interstate and through the trees, we could see the light of the bears' fire. Wallace Jr. wanted to go back to the house and get his .22 and go shoot one, and I explained why that would be wrong. "Besides," I said, "a .22 wouldn't do much more to a bear than make it mad."

"Besides," I added, "It's illegal to hunt in the medians."

The only trick to mounting a tire by hand, once you have beaten or pried it onto the rim, is setting the bed. You do this by setting the tire upright, sitting on it, and bouncing it up and down between your legs while the air goes in. When the bead sets on the rim, it makes a satisfying "pop." On Thursday, I kept Wallace Jr. home from school and showed him how to do this until he got it right. Then we climbed our fence and crossed the field to get a look at the bears.

In northern Virginia, according to "Good Morning America," the bears were keeping their fires going all day long. Here in western Kentucky, though, it was still warm for late October and they only stayed around the fires at night. Where they went and what they did in the daytime, I don't know. Maybe they were watching from the newberry bushes as Wallace Jr. and I climbed the government fence and crossed the northbound lanes. I carried an axe and Wallace Jr. brought his .22, not because

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he wanted to kill a bear but because a boy likes to carry some kind of a gun. The median was all tangled with brush and vines under the maples, oaks, and sycamores. Even though we were only a hundred yards from the house, I had never been there, and neither had anyone else that I knew of. It was like a created country. We found a path in the center and followed it down across a slow, short stream that flowed out of one grate and into another. The tracks in the gray mud were the first bear signs we saw. There was a musty but not really unpleasant smell. In a clearing under a big hollow beech, where the fire had been, we found nothing but ashes. Logs were drawn up in a rough circle and the smell was stronger. I stirred the ashes and found enough coals left to start a new flame, so I banked them back the way they had been left.

I cut a little firewood and stacked it to one side, just to be neighborly.

Maybe the bears were watching us from the bushes even then. There's no way to know. I tasted one of the newberries and spit it out. It was so sweet it was sour, just the sort of thing you would imagine a bear would like.

That evening after supper, I asked Wallace Jr. if he might want to go with me to visit Mother. I wasn't surprised when he said "yes." Kids have more consideration than folks give them credit for. We found her sitting on the concrete front porch of the Home, watching the cars go by on I-65. The nurse said she had been agitated all day. I wasn't surprised by that, either. Every fall as the leaves change, she gets restless, maybe the word is hopeful, again. I brought her into the dayroom and combed her long white hair. "Nothing but bears on TV anymore," the nurse complained, flipping the channels. Wallace Jr. picked up the remote after the nurse left, and we watched a CBS or NBC Special Report about some hunters in Virginia who had gotten their houses torched. The TV interviewed a hunter and his wife whose $117,500 Shenandoah Valley home had burned. She blamed the bears. He didn't blame the bears, but he was suing for compensation from the state since he had a valid hunting license. The state hunting commissioner came on and said that possession of a hunting license didn't prohibit (enjoin, I think, was the word he used) *the hunted* from striking back. I thought that was a pretty liberal view for a state commissioner. Of course, he had a vested interest in not paying off. I'm not a hunter myself.

"Don't bother coming on Sunday," Mother told Wallace Jr. with a wink. "I've drove a million miles and I've got one hand on the gate." I'm used to her saying stuff like that, especially in the fall, but I was afraid it would upset the boy. In fact, he looked worried after we left and I asked him what was wrong.

"How could she have drove a million miles?" he asked. She had told

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him 48 miles a day for 39 years, and he had worked it out on his calculator to be 336,960 miles.

"Have *driven*," I said. "And it's forty-eight in the morning and forty-eight in the afternoon. Plus there were the football trips. Plus, old folks exaggerate a little." Mother was the first woman school bus driver in the state. She did it every day and raised a family, too. Dad just farmed.

I usually get off the interstate at Smiths Grove, but that night I drove north all the way to Horse Cave and doubled back so Wallace Jr. and I could see the bears' fires. There were not as many as you would think from the TV—one every six or seven miles, hidden back in a clump of trees or under a rocky ledge. Probably they look for water as well as wood. Wallace Jr. wanted to stop, but it's against the law to stop on the interstate and I was afraid the state police would run us off.

There was a card from Wallace in the mailbox. He and Elizabeth were doing fine and having a wonderful time. Not a word about Wallace Jr., but the boy didn't seem to mind. Like most kids his age, he doesn't really enjoy going places with his parents.

On Saturday afternoon, the Home called my office (Burley Belt Drought & Hail) and left word that Mother was gone. I was on the road. I work Saturdays. It's the only day a lot of part-time farmers are home. My heart literally skipped a beat when I called in and got the message, but only a beat. I had long been prepared. "It's a blessing," I said when I got the nurse on the phone.

"You don't understand" the nurse said. "Not *passed* away, gone. *Ran* away, gone. Your mother has escaped." Mother had gone through the door at the end of the corridor when no one was looking, wedging the door with her comb and taking a bedspread which belonged to the Home. What about her tobacco? I asked. It was gone. That was a sure sign she was planning to stay away. I was in Franklin, and it took me less than an hour to get to the Home on I-65. The nurse told me that Mother had been acting more and more confused lately. Of course they are going to say that. We looked around the grounds, which is only an acre with no trees between the interstate and a soybean field. Then they had me leave a message at the Sheriff's office. I would have to keep paying for her care until she was officially listed as Missing, which would be Monday.

It was dark by the time I got back to the house, and Wallace Jr. was fixing supper. This just involves opening a few cans, already selected and grouped together with a rubber band. I told him his grandmother had gone, and he nodded, saying, "She told us she would be." I called Florida and left a message. There was nothing more to be done. I sat down and tried to watch TV, but there was nothing on. Then, I looked

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out the back door, and saw the firelight twinkling through the trees across the northbound lane of I-65, and realized I just might know where she had gone to find her.

It was definitely getting colder, so I got my jacket. I told the boy to wait by the phone in case the Sheriff called, but when I looked back, halfway across the field, there he was behind me. He didn't have a jacket. I let him catch up. He was carrying his .22, and I made him leave it leaning against our fence. It was harder climbing the government fence in the dark, at my age, than it had been in the daylight. I am sixty-one. The highway was busy with cars heading south and trucks heading north.

Crossing the shoulder, I got my pants cuffs wet on the long grass, already wet with dew. It is actually bluegrass.

The first few feet into the trees it was pitch black and the boy grabbed my hand. Then it got lighter. At first I thought it was the moon, but it was the high beams shining like moonlight into the treetops, allowing Wallace Jr. and me to pick our way through the brush. We soon found the path and its familiar bear smell.

I was wary of approaching the bears at night. If we stayed on the path we might run into one in the dark, but if we went through the bushes we might be seen as intruders. I wondered if maybe we shouldn't have brought the gun.

We stayed on the path. The light seemed to drip down from the canopy of the woods like rain. The going was easy, especially if we didn't try to look at the path but let our feet find their own way.

Then through the trees I saw their fire.

The fire was mostly of sycamore and beech branches, the kind of fire that puts out very little heat or light and lots of smoke. The bears hadn't learned the ins and outs of wood yet. They did okay at tending it, though. A large cinnamon brown northern-looking bear was poking the fire with a stick, adding a branch now and then from a pile at his side. The others sat around in a loose circle on the logs. Most were smaller black or honey bears, one was a mother with cubs. Some were eating berries from a hubcap. Not eating, but just watching the fire, my mother sat among them with the bedspread from the Home around her shoulders.

If the bears noticed us, they didn't let on. Mother patted a spot right next to her on the log and I sat down. A bear moved over to let Wallace Jr. sit on her other side.

The bear smell is rank but not unpleasant, once you get used to it. It's not like a barn smell, but wilder. I leaned over to whisper something to Mother and she shook her head. *It would be rude to whisper around these creatures that don't possess the power of speech,* she let me know without

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speaking. Wallace Jr. was silent too. Mother shared the bedspread with us and we sat for what seemed hours, looking into the fire.

The big bear tended the fire, breaking up the dry branches by holding one end and stepping on them, like people do. He was good at keeping it going at the same level. Another bear poked the fire from time to time, but the others left it alone. It looked like only a few of the bears knew how to use fire, and were carrying the others along. But isn't that how it is with everything? Every once in a while, a smaller bear walked into the circle of firelight with an armload of wood and dropped it onto the pile. Median wood has a silvery cast, like driftwood.

Wallace Jr. isn't fidgety like a lot of kids. I found it pleasant to sit and stare into the fire. I took a little piece of Mother's *Red Man,* though I don't generally chew. It was no different from visiting her at the Home, only more interesting, because of the bears. There were about eight or ten of them. Inside the fire itself, things weren't so dull, either: little dramas were being played out as fiery chambers were created and then destroyed in a crashing of sparks. My imagination ran wild. I looked around the circle at the bears and wondered what *they* saw. Some had their eyes closed. Though they were gathered together, their spirits still seemed solitary, as if each bear was sitting alone in front of its own fire.

The hubcap came around and we all took some newberries. I don't know about Mother, but I just pretended to eat mine. Wallace Jr. made a face and spit his out. When he went to sleep, I wrapped the bedspread around all three of us. It was getting colder and we were not provided, like the bears, with fur. I was ready to go home, but not Mother. She pointed up toward the canopy of trees, where a light was spreading, and then pointed to herself. Did she think it was angels approaching from on high? It was only the high beams of some southbound truck, but she seemed mighty pleased. Holding her hand, I felt it grow colder and colder in mine.

Wallace Jr. woke me up by tapping on my knee. It was past dawn, and his grandmother had died sitting on the log between us. The fire was banked up and the bears were gone and someone was crashing straight through the woods, ignoring the path. It was Wallace. Two state troopers were right behind him. He was wearing a white shirt, and I realized it was Sunday morning. Underneath his sadness on learning of Mother's death, he looked peeved.

The troopers were sniffing the air and nodding. The bear smell was still strong. Wallace and I wrapped Mother in the bedspread and started with her body back out to the highway. The troopers stayed behind and scattered the bears' fire ashes and flung their firewood away into the

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bushes. It seemed a petty thing to do. They were like bears themselves, each one solitary in his own uniform.

There was Wallace's Olds 98 on the median, with its radial tires looking squashed on the grass. In front of it there was a police car with a trooper standing beside it, and behind it a funeral home hearse, also an Olds 98.

"First report we've had of them bothering old folks," the trooper said to Wallace. "That's not hardly what happened at all," I said, but nobody asked me to explain. They have their own procedures. Two men in suits got out of the hearse and opened the rear door. That to me was the point at which Mother departed this life. After we put her in, I put my arms around the boy. He was shivering even though it wasn't that cold. Sometimes death will do that, especially at dawn, with the police around and the grass wet, even when it comes as a friend.

We stood for a minute watching the cars pass. "It's a blessing," Wallace said. It's surprising how much traffic there is at 6:22 A.M.

That afternoon, I went back to the median and cut a little firewood to replace what the troopers had flung away. I could see the fire through the trees that night.

I went back two nights later, after the funeral. The fire was going and it was the same bunch of bears, as far as I could tell. I sat around with them a while but it seemed to make them nervous, so I went home. I had taken a handful of newberries from the hubcap, and on Sunday I went with the boy and arranged them on Mother's grave. I tried again, but it's no use, you can't eat them.

Unless you're a bear. ●

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TOWARD KILIMANJARO

by Ian McDonald

Ian McDonald, a recent finalist for the Nebula award, returns to the pages of *IAsfm* after a long absence. His latest tale is an enthralling portrayal of a young woman's journey into the heart of darkness...

art: Terry Lee

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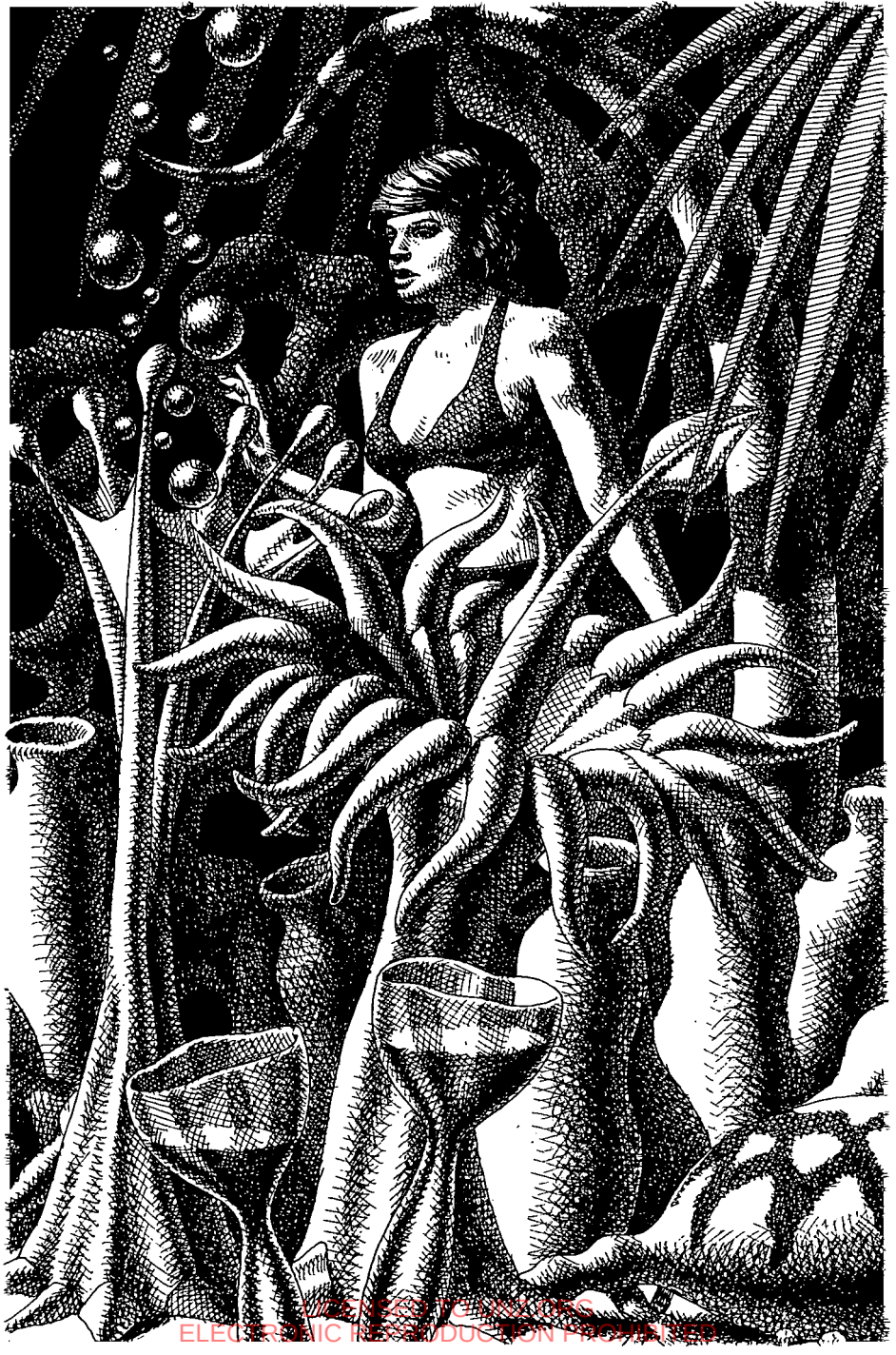

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To every book its inscription. I have written my name in black ink inside the cloth cover, but the syllables are harsh and clashing in this land of whispered sibilants and strong consonants. How much better the name Langrishe gave me: *Moon,* generous, looping consonants, vowels like two eyes, two souls looking out of the page. One half of T.P.'s final gift to me, this journal, clothbound and intimate in Liberty print; I treasure it, hug it to me, companion and confessor. T.P.'s other gift I treated less kindly: black dragonfly wings shredded by the impact, struts snapped like the bones of birds. Already the forest is at work on it, converting the organic plastics into dripping stalactites of black slime.

It is over an hour since I lost the beat of the helicopters in the undersong of the Chaga; my crash-landing must have looked sufficiently convincing for them to abandon the hunt. Forgive me, T.P., but you would understand: skimming across the tree-tops toward the looming edge of the Chaga with two Kenyan Army/Air Force Nighthawks behind me, expecting at any second to be smashed into nothingness by a thermal imaging StarStreak missile, one's options are somewhat limited. Sorry about the microlyte, T.P. But I will be good to the diary, I promise.

I look again at those four letters: Moon. How much of life is a search for our true names; the jumble of ideograms that spells us as we truly are? Some, like T.P. Costello, attain true personhood in being reduced to their initials. Some intimate, cozy souls never become more than their Christian names; to others, that name is a useless appendix, their true identity lies in their surnames, like you, Langrishe. And some only find personhood in the names they attract to themselves. *Moon.* They cannot see themselves; it takes another to tell them what they are. Moon. Langrishe. T.P. Our players. No, I have omitted one vital addition to the Dramatis Personae: the mountain.

"Wide as all the world; great, high, and unbelievably white in the sun," as Hemingway described it. To the Maasai, it is *Ngajé Ngai,* the House of God; but most simple and striking is its Swahili name: *Kilima Njaro,* the White Mountain.

You never forget your first view of the mountain, as you never forget your first, nervous, thrilling view of a lover's body. When I flew in to the Ol Tukai that first time, the clouds were hanging low across the mountain, but still its presence could be sensed, like God at Sinai. Interviewing Langrishe in his office, he noticed my attention being increasingly distracted as beyond the window the final rags of cloud dissolved and dispersed and that astonishing white tableland caught and kindled in the African twilight. Spellbound, I watched the shadows move up across the uncanny geometries of the alien forest until the final red glow was extinguished from the snows. You never forget; like that first, electrifying exploration of love, you keep it secret and warm in your heart.

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And now, White Mountain, I make my exploration of you. Langrishe theorized (but then his theories were cheap and plentiful as flies on a beggar) that the symbiotic systems of the forest interlink so completely that the whole forty kilometer wide ring of life forms one great synaptic system: does the touch of my hand to a loop of tubing pulsing with warm oil signal a spark of recognition? Can you feel my approach through the groves of slowly turning windmill trees and the swaying fingers of pseudo-coral? Do you sense me as I spiral up through your northern foothills, do you know me?

Again, my name, inscribed in black ink inside the front cover of the cloth-bound journal. I have given much thought to what kind of journal I should keep. A neo-Victorian almanac of wonders and horrors, each neat copper-plate entry headed, Day the –th, Year of Grace 199–? Tempting. But my choice of traveling companions dictates otherwise. T. S. Eliot. Joseph Conrad. Thomas Merton. Not so much an expedition to the interior as a pilgrimage through the darklands of the soul. Langrishe as holy Grail? The comparison would please him, the arrogant bastard.

Early in the afternoon I came upon the remains of the old Ol Tukai Research Facility. Subtle transubstantiation: I had been picking a path between the vegetation-shrouded bones for some minutes before the nagging tingle of familiarity became recognition. The voracious forest life had long since converted the organic materials to its own matrix of tubes and fans and flows of blue lichen. All changed, changed utterly. It is less than a year since the line of advance engulfed the center; now only the concrete-and-steel skeleton enforces some form of human geometrical discipline to the biological anarchy. I paused a while in the memory of Langrishe's office. Kilimanjaro was lost behind wave upon wave of forest, the mood strange, and I uncertain of my own feelings. From out of the wilderness came a twittering, chiming music, like a child's experiments with a synthesizer, uncanny and alien. I never saw what it was that sang that song.

I will not spend the night here. Memories too big.

Wide-eyed and clueless in the pick-up bay at Nairobi airport: I'd been in Kenya a whole half-hour and was still reeling from the *Africanness* of it all. Stepping off the plane into the sour grey pre-dawn drizzle, I'd almost kissed the tarmac; it was surely destined for canonization, the place where the astonishingly talented girl writer from Dublin town who was going to write *the* book on *the* phenomenon of *the* century first intersected with the surface of Africa. Now, two bags on the concrete, waiting and waiting while all around me taxis hire-cars limousines shuttle buses were speeding my fellow passengers off to Sheratons Hiltons Intercontinentals Ramadas PanAfrics, the *Africanness* of it all was be-

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ginning to pall a little. Another flight came in, another disgorgement of travelers into the hinterland. I watched my own flight take off, onward bound, into a huge sunrise. The sun was well up and about its business when a dirty white Peugeot pick-up with what looked like a small greenhouse bolted to the back swung into the parking bay. The window rolled down, a face like an angst-ridden owl looked me up and down from behind immense spectacles and finally bellowed in dearest dirtiest Dublin:

"Bags in the back. You in the front, I'll get a ticket if I hang around here much longer; what'll I get?"

"A ticket?"

"That's correct."

T.P. Costello: East African correspondent of the *Irish Times;* liaison, contact, mentor, and, in the end, best friend; the only man in Kenya who was fool enough (or impecunious enough) to be prepared to share an office with me. And the worst driver I have ever known. Some people are born to bad driving. He aspired to it; to him it was a major social accomplishment. As we took a traffic circle at a speed that left rubber on the blacktop, he asked me, "What kind of underwear have you got on?"

Wondering just what kind of a pervert I had saddled myself with, I told him.

"Throw them out," he said. "Nothing but cotton. Nylon traps moisture. You can get fungus. What can you get?"

"Fungus?"

"That's correct."

Howling down the wide boulevards of downtown Nairobi, I noticed we were passing by shining skyscrapers with names like Sheraton Hilton Intercontinental Ramada PanAfric.

"Just where are we going?" (An explosion of hooting as the Peugeot pickup pulled out to overtake a lumbering green-and-yellow municipal bus straight into the path of an oncoming Nissan van: I'd never actually seen an expression quite like the driver's before.)

"The African Inland Church Guesthouse. It's comfortable, it's clean, it's central without you getting a noseful of diesel fumes every time you open your window, it's quiet—most of the guests are missionaries on R 'n' R—Mrs. Kivebulaya, the proprietrix, thinks Irish girls are polite, quiet, charming, and well-behaved—please don't disillusion her—and, above all, it's cheap. Given, the meat can be a bit chewy, but you can afford it."

We swung up a steeply curving drive and lurched to a halt in front of a relaxed red-tiled building, a genial mongrel of colonial and clinker-block ethnic. T.P. Costello busied himself in the back of the Peugeot and

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appeared with my cases and three chickens strung together at the feet swinging from one hand.

"My compliments to Mrs. Kivebulaya," he said handing cases and chickens to a geriatric porter dressed in a jacket of almost inspirational vileness. T.P. screamed the engine, preparing for another ballistic leap into the traffic. "224b, Tom M'boya Street!" he shouted, and hurled himself into the streets.

I had never eaten chicken gizzard before. I enjoyed it much more than I should have.

Impressions from my notebooks: pen-sketches in that early light when we see clearest.

Woodsmoke, shit, and diesel. Street perfume; sweated from the red earth like a pheromone.

Wonderful incongruity: Colonel Sanders' patrician features intimidating the intersection of University Way and Koinange Street. Do all the black faces make him feel back on the ol' plantation again? Must order chicken gizzard with fries and buttermilk roll.

A man dressed Arab-style pushing what seems to be a small dog kennel on wheels along Kenyatta Avenue. The creeping horror when I glimpsed inside, the glitter of human eyes: a woman, wrapped in Muslim black, save for her hands; and eyes. . . .

The Hilton is extravagantly proud of its English fish and chips served in a copy of the London *Times*. T.P. tells me of a certain journalist who goes there every day to order the delicacy, throw away the fish and chips and read the newspaper.

The loping city: the people move like liquid in the streets, as if to the mental beat of drums and wires.

The casual bribery of the police: T.P.'s KitKat tin in the glove compartment of the Peugeot where he keeps the bribes for motoring offenses. The next best thing to a totally honest police force is a totally corrupt one. Dame Market Forces. . . .

For a city under siege, Nairobi is remarkably cavalier about the fact. Since the package came down in the Nyandarua National Park last year, opening a second front, I reckon Nairobi has about a thousand days left before the advancing walls of vegetation close. But life goes on with a blythe disinterestedness that amazes this European girl, who would be running round like Chicken Little announcing the imminent fall of the sky. Disinterest, or African fatalism? Too much like a metaphor of death for this white girl, this *m'zungu*.

To every city its municipal obsessions: Dublin's is finding somewhere to park the car, Nairobi's is coin-in-the-slot photo booths.

T.P.'s office was three rooms above the Rift Valley Peugeot Service Depot on Tom M'boya Street where he was apparently offering asylum

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to an entire family of Asian refugees: mother on the telephone, daughter one on the typewriter, daughter two in reception, father bookkeeper, number one son fileclerk, number two son runner, honored grandmother *chai*-maker. What amazed me was that they were so infernally busy all the time. I suspect that they were terrified of T.P. turning the lot of them out onto Tom M'boya Street; certainly he ran his office with the self-assured smugness of a minor, benevolent dictator.

For my thousand shillings per month I had use of what T.P. called a "Captain Kirk Chair," a desk, a telephone, a photocopier, a time-share of an asthmatic word processor, the occasional privileged glimpse into the specially darkened room where the fax machine sat like a presiding deity, unlimited *chai* and biscuits and the pleasure of T.P. Costello's wit, wisdom, and virtually continuous bitching about his immediate superior, one so-called Jacobellini.

And while I sat drinking *chai,* engaging in dubious battle with the word processor and spending entire afternoons waiting for the operator to connect me with some minor cog in the great wheel of scientists and researchers, humanity's first encounter with an alien life form was advancing toward me one hundred steady meters per day.

Sometimes I felt it would be easiest just to sit and wait for it to come creeping along Tom M'boya Street, up the stairs and into the office.

Even the professional imagination falters before the face of the Chaga. Description fails, only analogy can convey some impression of this landscape through which I am traveling. The experience that comes closest is the time with Langrishe on the coast, when I was working on the book; our explorations of the reef in snorkel, mask and flippers. Crucified on the surface tension, peering down like vacationing Olympians into the underworld. God, how I burned! That night in the banda; the wind in the palms and the rattle of the thatch; Langrishe's hands slicing lemons, rubbing the juice into my skin. . . . The gentle, painful, almost hallucinatory love-making, me riding him—was that the boom and crash of the surf on the reef, or the roar of my own blood and bone, or the song of Langrishe, inside me?

Shape yourself into some long-legged chitinous arthropod picking across a coral reef and you will have the feel of it. There is a submarine quality to the light that reaches you through the canopy of balloons, bladders, fans, umbrellas; submarine, and ecclesiastical, a cyclorama of colors like the light in a drowned cathedral. Analogy again.

I am beginning to wonder if my supplies will be sufficient. I had provisioned for twenty days; it may take that long just to reach the lower slopes of the mountain. The riotous Chaga-life confounds my sense of time and distance; I cannot judge how far, how fast I have come. I was

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so certain, then; now my stupidity at thinking that I can find one man in five thousand square kilometers of, literally, another world, astounds me. The sense of isolation is colossal.

Thank God for faithful fellow travelers! Conrad; brother explorer into the heart of darkness; Eliot, cartographer of the desert in the heart of man; Merton, pilgrim into the cloud of unknowing on the dawnward edge of faith. They know what it is to venture into an unknown region, into the utter subjective darkness of the interior wilderness.

Some spore is attacking my copy of *Seeds of Contemplation,* the vinyl cover is breaking out in tiny red warts. Amazing, the tenacity of these almost invisible flecks of life; despite my rigorous efforts to rid myself of all plastic and petro-chemical based materials, they still managed to bring the little acrylic aglets at the end of my spare pair of laces out in sulphur yellow blossoms. Ironic that after three years of the most intense scientific scrutiny anywhere on the planet, all the researchers can conclude is that the pseudo-vegetation (their word, not mine, please) of the Chaga is a carbon based form of life grouped around long chains of what seem to be polymers as opposed to the amino-acid/protein axis of terrestrial life. The phrase "Plastic Forest" entered the world vocabulary despite the protests of the researchers that really it wasn't plastic at all, rather a kind of long-chain self-replicating carbohydrate pseudo-polymer. Doesn't have quite the same ring, though.

Popular imagination perfumes the place like a decommissioned oil refinery. The reality is quite different; essential oils and musks, spices and incenses that seem maddeningly familiar though the memory can never quite place them exactly. . . . Sex. The Chaga smells like sex.

The industrial/chemical analogy may be very near the truth. The Chaga is only partly photosynthetic (and that part which is seems to operate by a system quite different from, and more efficient than, the green green grass of home); some exploit temperature differentials, others make use of catalytic chemical reactions, some employ wind power, others remarkably efficient heat pumps, others still generate electricity directly from what can only be described as solar panels. Some, like the corals they closely resemble, feed off aerial bacteria, some literally eat rock. All are linked together in vastly complex hierarchies of symbiosis. Benumbed biologists I interviewed for the book maintained that it might take decades to unravel just one symbiotic system. The most recent theories, which will form an appendix to the finished book, extend the factory analogy to the microscopic; at the cellular level, the organisms resemble machines more than biological entities.

If T.P.'s sources are anything to go by (and have they ever been anything other than reliable?) the executive singles of the Hiltons Sheratons Intercontinentals Ramadas and PanAfrics are hot-bunking Silicon Val-

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ley cyberneticists, brisk Teutonic micro-engineers, tofu-and-bran custom logic designers, and giggling Sony-Nihon chip customizers; all enpgaged in internecine warfare to be the first to bring home the flitch to their particular genus of *Homo Polycorporatus*. Sorry boys, but the Good News from the Chaga is that co-operation beats competition hands down, and is advancing toward your expense-account suites at one hundred meters per day.

I saw a vervet monkey today; nervous eyes in the shimmering canopy. A webbed sail of ribs, like some remnant of the time of the dinosaurs, grew from its back. I did not take it for a good omen.

I shall spend the night in the ruins of an old game lodge I came across unexpectedly; a memory of the days of zebra-striped Volkswagen minibuses bristling broadsides of Nikons. One thing the Chaga has done is restore peace and dignity to the land. These foothills of Kilimanjaro feel old in a way the land in Europe never can; it deserves the respect due age. I slung up my hammock on the verandah of an old game lodge. I had meant to write, cook, wash, do something; but a melancholy lassitude came over me. A calling of spirit to spirit, almost, as I lost myself in the shafts of green light. The fragile moment of self-unknowing when the consciousness is totally subsumed into the other, when the slightest tremor of self-awareness taps the still waters and the reflection shivers into ripples. Time out of mind. I heard him. I heard him, his voice, out there, a voice in solo flight above the chords of the forest song. I hear you, Langrishe. I am coming.

Toward nightfall the small glade in which the abandoned lodge stood came alive and ringing with songs. Twittering, rippling, passing into and out of phase with each other. As the first of them came out of the gathering dark, I rose to my feet; just the few at first, then the main body, a procession of creatures like faintly luminous jellyfish rolling and undulating through the air. They separated around the lodge like a river around a rock; they were still coming to break around me as I retired to my hammock, out of darkness, onward into the darkness again.

I could tell you the exact place and time I fell in love with Peter Langrishe: March 17, 10:20 P.M., beside the drinks trolley in the garden of the Irish Ambassador's Residence. I could even tell you what we were drinking: me: John Jameson's, neat, just a clink of ice; he: a Glenlivet that had somehow found a niche on His Excellency's strictly patriotic booze wagon.

The annual Ambassadorial St. Patrick's Day party is the highlight of the expatriate community year. Southerner or Northerner (everyone is an Irishman on St. Patrick's Night) voluntary workers, development engineers, teaching sisters, rural midwives, Bible translators will move

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heaven and earth to be there for His Excellency's bash. Head of any queue was always T.P. Costello: it was widely known and never officially denied that if His Excellency really wanted to know what was happening in the greater world he would do much better visiting 224b Tom M'boya Street than grinding himself exceeding fine in the tedious mills of diplomatic intelligence.

An expatriate and colleague of T.P., my gilt-edged invitation was assured; knowing my tendency to drink myself horizontal—something I did not much want to do in the presence of teaching sisters, rural midwives, Bible Translators, Ambassadors, etc—I had thought of declining until T.P. whispered that it might well be in my best professional interests to attend. I bought a dress for the occasion, the best my means and Nairobi's supply could achieve.

Two weeks of daily exposure to T.P.'s driving still hadn't immunized me to taking traffic circles at forty. Dodging red Kenatco taxis, he explained to me that he had come into certain information to the effect that certain highly placed individuals connected with a certain international research community could be in attendance at a certain Ambassadorial bash *ce soir*.

"I didn't know there were any Irish on the project."

"Oh, there aren't," said T.P., terrorizing a flock of pedestrians with his horn. "But it's good social and better political grace to be seen to be hospitable to the scientific community. Honorary Irishmen for one night."

Ghosts and illuminations: the assemblage of rented tuxes and almost-posh frocks was lit by outdoor candles on poles and lubricated by the ever-solicitous presence of the servants, all white smiles and freshly ironed cuffs. From the cover of a glass of J.J., T.P. steered me through the clashing rocks to the more noteworthy landmarks. An ectomorphic Norman Bates in animated conversation with a nun. "Nikolas Van Rensberg, Project Supervisor of the Ol Tukai Facility: Grand Poo-bah; between thee and me, he's a bit of a wanker." Laurel and Hardy arguing by candlelight, a raven-haired woman, in a dress that earned her my undying enmity, trying, and failing, to keep the peace. "Conrad Laurens from Ol Tukai, the Bouncing Belgian, and Hakko Lemmenjavi, the Frigging Finn, from Nyandarua. Lord High Executioner and Lord High Everything Else. No love lost between the two facilities. The fine, and exceedingly foolish, young creature between them is Annabelle Pasquali, Senior Botanical Supervisor from Ol Tukai. I once had a short, sweet, and altogether wonderful affair with her."

I wanted to know more about the short, sweet, and altogether wonderful affair, but T.P. had moved on to a small and typically astringent American woman in Nina Ricci frock and red Reebocks ("Honestly, these Colonials; bad taste is a national virtue,"), holding court with a diplo-

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matically bored Ambassador who was surreptitiously searching his pockets for cigarettes. "Dorothy Bazyn. Project Security. The military exclusion zones around the Chagas were her idea. I once tried, God knows why, to chat her up at a cocktail party in the Hilton and she asked me if I'd like a cocktail stick rammed up my dick." A solitary man by the drinks trolley with a pigtail and eyes like a Yeats poem. "Ah. Now. This one might be worth your while. In fact, of all the luminaries here foregathered, I would definitely say he would pay the best dividend. Peter Langrishe, Head of Xenobiotics, whatever that is; and a fellow Celt, though of the genus *Pictii* rather than the genus *Hibernii*. If you want a dash of vindaloo in your book, he's the boy to talk to. More wild and woolly theories about the Chaga than you can shake a stick at. Aliens are his pet obsession."

"Introduce me this instant, Costello."

T.P.'s smile froze on his face.

"Oh shit. Jacobellini has just waltzed in with two lumps of silicon implant on either arm. I thought he was well out of it down in Dar. Any excuse for a piss-up. I suppose I'd better go and pay me *devoirs*. Behave yourself. What'll you do?"

"Behave myself."

"That's correct."

Disgusting how like South Pacific it was, some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, all that . . . just at that moment our eyes did meet, and hold. I attempted to match my orbit with his, weaving and apologizing through the teaching sisters rural midwives Bible translators.

Overheards: "I tried to get him to talk about the blood, but he wouldn't!" (Then, more vehemently,) "He wouldn't!"

"Are you sure you remembered the chain saw?"

"I mean, can you imagine, going out with the same girl for *ten days?*"

"And then he told me about the psychopath. . . ."

"Yes, but exactly *what* kind of a prick *was* Proust?"

"You know, some mornings I get up and I just feel so . . . Antipodean, you know?"

We arrived in each other's gravitational field. We circled, wrestlers trying to get a verbal grip on each other.

"Nice dress."

I wriggled, consciously counting every centimeter of bare flesh.

"Nice . . . ah, pigtail."

He told me his name, I told him mine; little hostages, exchanged.

"It isn't you at all," he said.

"What, my name? An unfortunate inevitability of being born in a Catholic country."

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"No, you deserve better. You should be something more . . . elemental. A come-by-night. A *Moon.*"

Sometimes you can *feel* your pupils dilate. Sometimes you possess the awareness of the exact state of every muscle in your body. Sometimes the fingers of unseen ghosts caress your spine.

"Moon. I like it. Moon I shall be, for the evening at least. And do you have an elemental name for yourself?"

"Just Langrishe."

St. Patrick's Day, 10:20, beside the drinks trolley on the lawn of the Ambassador's residence; where and when it began. Same place, two minutes later, where it almost ended; a gasp and a sigh from the gathered celebrants as a long slow streak of violet light drew a strict terminator across the sky above Nairobi. Twenty-five personal pagers exploded in frenzied beeping; needlessly, as the representatives of the Facility were already stampeding the cloakroom and calling taxis on their cellphones to take them to Wilson airfield.

Not even an apology.

I had to drive T.P. home. He interrupted a major monologue about the dangers of dehydration and the virtues of ascorbic acid in ameliorating the effects of extreme inebriation only to throw up his entire night's consumption of John Jameson down the front of my party dress.

His arrival in the office on Tom M'boya street at twenty to one was extremely wary. It took the offer of a late Indian lunch at the Norfolk Hotel to placate me. Over rogan josh, he told me that the satellite tracking station at Longonot had picked up the biological package coming in from orbit over the Solomon Islands. It had impacted somewhere in West Cameroun, and was currently under investigation by an advance team of international researchers.

He tried to make me pay half the bill.

The primal heart of the New Africa is shaped like a twin-deck CD twenty-watt-per-channel boom box. It beats in 4/4 time from Sony woofers and JVC bass drivers to the pulse of hy-lyfe guitars pickin' three-chord tricks. I have seen Rendille herdsmen, perched in the one-legged attitude of Biblical repose, wearing Walkman headphones; I have seen Nandi Hills coffee-growers in the fields with ghetto-blasters strapped across their backs. The first thing you hear when you arrive in Kenya is the Immigration Officer's radio; from that moment on, the general dance never ceases. The gaudy, hazy chaos of the country bus station. The voices and colors and perfume of the fruit market. The Asian store where seriously fat women fuss over *kangas*. Sam's Super Shine Stall on Kenyatta Avenue. Along Koinange Street, from every street vendor selling maize and kebabs grilled over Volkswagen hubcaps full of charcoal.

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So familiar that I almost didn't realize the utter incongruity of what I was hearing. Sunny-Adé and his African Beats; thirty kilometers into the Chaga, on the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro.

The WaChagga may be the last proud people in the New Africa. The invasion of alien flora and fauna had dispossessed them of their ancestral lands on the slopes of the mountain, it had even taken their name; all it had left them was their stubbornness. Not the most obviously useful asset against the advancing wave of life, but where fire, chainsaw, Agent Orange, Agent Green, and finally recombinant DNA had failed to stem the green tide, sheer stubbornness, and infinite adaptability, had won a small but not insignificant victory. In the general panic to evacuate when it became obvious that Moshi, Himo, and a clutter of smaller settlements along the Tanzanian side of the mountain were going to be engulfed, a few recalcitrant WaChagga had slipped under the wire around the resettlement camps and vanished from the twentieth century.

I know how Dr. Livingstone must have felt. . . .

The men of the settlement turned out to meet me, from honored grandfathers to a five-year-old swinging the boombox I had heard over the general voice of the forest.

(They insisted I call it that: the forest. *They* were the Chagga, and they resented the forest having buccaneered their name.)

Not so much Dr. Livingstone, I presume, as Dorothy in Munchkinland. There was even a Yellow Brick Road to follow, hexagonal tiles of hard yellow plastic that concluded in a comically accurate spiral at the center of the village.

We call tree-dwellers arboreals, but what do we call flower-dwellers? *Floreals?* Sounds too much like a dead bullfighter, but the word fits; the WaChagga lived, literally, in flowers. An impeccably mannered young graduate from the University of Dar es Salaam was assigned as my guide to the wonders of the community his people had created in the forest. Seen by daylight, the flower-houses were wide parasols of zip-locked iridescent petals atop a central trunk. In their shade, naked children scampered and monolithic women sat, moving only their eyes to look at the *m'zungu* woman. Passing the flowers again by twilight, I saw the petals folding down into night-proof bubbles of light and warmth. I was taken to join a circle of women who were sitting and weaving what looked like nylon thread on belt looms while watching a ten-year-old American super-soap (courtesy Voice of Kenya Broadcasting) on a portable Sony color set (somewhat scabbed and ulcerous, but nonetheless functional) that was plugged into the trunk of the tree.

"The petals generate electricity from sunlight," explained my guide. Freshly graduated and already disillusioned with the academic life, he had brought himself and his European Studies degree home to the shadow

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of the White Mountain—and then the biological package came down. "The trunk stores power during the day for us at night." Balloon-sized globes clustered near the top of the trunk were bioluminiscent. "They somehow know to come on when it gets dark. Look!" He turned a spigot-like extrusion from the trunk; water splashed. "We have hot as well; solar heating. Come!" The friendly imperiousness of the Africans: He guided me around the municipal plumbing system: the huge transparent gourds that were the main cisterns, the obscenely peristaltic organic pumps that maintained pressure, the stacked fans of solar absorbers that heated the water, the distribution system of plastic tubes and pipes to every house. The tour detoured via the municipal biogas plant to conclude in the orchards that had sprung up around the settlement and which now provided their entire diet.

I was the only woman guest at the dinner in my honor that night; seated around the central spiral with the men folk, while the women served up the fruits of the Chaga. As an honorary man, I had debated whether I should follow local fashion and undress for dinner. Casting modesty to the devil, I turned up in old cycling shorts and silver.

As we ate, Chief Webuye spoke to me through his interpreter. "We did not come to it. It came to us. It was not easy in those early days; before the orchards grew, we could not eat the food, many of us grew sick and died, but the land was ours and the land still knew us, and came to our need. From the bodies of the dead grew the trees that keep us, from their water came our water, from their bones came our bread, from their skins the houses that shelter us. The forest, having taken from us, is bound to give back the homes it took."

Traveler's wisdom from Chief Webuye: Where you see the color orange, you will always find water. Anything red will always be edible. Always shit before you sleep, and bury it, you will have food in the morning. A drop of blood on the ground and you will have fruit.

Behind me, the jack o'lantern glow of flower-houses closed up for the night, and the comforting jangle of guitars. Africans will always have their music. Not for the WaChagga the adolescent obsession with identity that mars modern African thought; they had found their identity in the very heart of the alienness. Eating with them, communing with them, I felt I was no longer a stranger in the forest.

Asleep that night in a pile of spun floss, I thought I heard my name called, very softly, very gently . . . *Moon*. . . . One, two, three times.

"Langrishe?" I unzipped the folded solar petals. My astral namesake was high and full and casting a silver unreality over the sleeping village. "Langrishe. . . ."

—Moon—

The Chaga was impenetrable as death. Haunted, frustrated, I retired

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to the house. My sleep ridden by incubus dreams. When next I woke, it was to the house petals unfurling to the sun.

Even before I heard the keening, wailing song of the women, I could feel the air stiff with fear and secrecy. They had gathered in a petal-house across the spiral, the women, slumped like black lava, rocking and nodding and moaning their song. One at a time they would rise and go forward to comfort the desolate young woman at the center of the ring. Totally absorbed with their mourning, they were oblivious to my approach; it was Tibuweye, the guide, who stopped me.

"Please. It is not for you. Constance, the young woman, she gave birth last night, but the child was stillborn. Please understand."

"I understand. I am sorry. Please tell her that I am sorry."

I glanced at the circle of women, at the mother wracked with the silent tears of complete grief, and, as the women swayed and rocked in their keening, at the baby at her feet.

The baby. . . .

One of the women saw my staring and whipped a sheet over the body.

The child had no arms, no legs; in their place, coiling green tendrils sprouted.

Before I left, they gave me two gifts. I am not certain which I treasure the more, the little glass jars that light up when I shake them, or the path that follows the path of the white man, the mad *m'zungu*, upward. All this morning I have climbed through the gardens of the WaChagga, the slopes ringing with the proud, animal cries of the men harvesting. I pause to eat some fruit from a tree; red fruit, it tastes of musk and sex, it tastes of the Chaga.

Did the apple in Eden feel *responsible?*

It must be one of those laws of universal perversity, the kind of thing you see in sticker form in the rear windows of Fords, that when the thing you want most in the world happens, you don't believe it. When the phone rang and there among the hissing and scratching was Dr. Peter Langrishe of the Ol Tukai Xenobiotics Department extending a personal invitation to me to fly down to Amboseli and spend a week at the center, all I was capable of were a few mumbled acquiescences and a numb replacing of the receiver. T.P. said I looked like a victim of a good mugging. Four hours later, I was standing on the apron at Wilson airfield, bags packed ("nothing plastic, my dear, and that includes Walkman, film, and toothbrush,") and fighting to maintain connection with my hat in the propwash from the Ol Tukai Twin Otter.

My first sight of the Chaga: glimpsed out of the cabin window as the aircraft banked into its final approach to the Amboseli airstrip. Half-hallucinatory, half-revelatory; a disc of rainbow-colored light which

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broke apart into flows and eddies, a pointillist sea of color, like a test for some new color-blindness. Then the plane banked again and we were down, scoring an arrow of dust across the dry lake bed.

He was waiting for me. God, but he looked good. I scarcely noticed the Kenyan soldiers treble-checking my security clearance on their portable datalink. Ol Tukai was ten miles away on dirt roads the texture of corrugated iron. Ten miles was the closest safe distance aircraft could come to the perimeter of the Chaga; early overflights with camera-loaded tourists had come to grief when the pilots found the fuel in the tanks turning to sludge and every scrap of plastic bursting into bloom. Langrishe fed me such little scraps of data and I sat grinning like a teenager, hanging on for grim death as the Daihatsu 4 × 4 took the ruts. Ol Tukai seemed to be in the process of dismantling itself into tea-chests and packing crates; both civilians and military were all check-lists and baling wire.

"Getting ready for the move." Langrishe nodded beyond the buildings. "Three kilometers is close enough."

My first four hours in Ol Tukai I had my security clearance checked eight times. "They're ashamed of it," Langrishe said. "Same goes for the Tanzanians. A kind of national disgrace. Right in the middle of their great and glorious task of nation-building, *this* happens, like a cancer in the body politic they'd rather the rest of the international community didn't know about. Want to come for a look at it before dinner? After you've finished interviewing, or whatever it is you do." Note for the book: no one in Ol Tukai ever called the Chaga by name, what was out there was a lurking, polymorphous "it."

I had not thought that it was possible to see the Chaga advance. One hundred meters per day, just over four meters per hour, sixty six centimeters per minute. One and two third centimeters per second. On the botanical scale, that's virtually relativistic. The line of advance was more subtle than I had envisaged, not so much a line of demarcation as an ever advancing gradation, from thorn scrub and grasses through increasing echelons of polygonal fungus and pseudo-lichen to low bladder plants and gourd-like growth, to tube bushes and small windmill trees and plants that sprayed water and lashed whip-like flails and spewed clouds of floating bubbles, to the towering columns and fans and webs of the false-corals and sponges, at which point the indigenous was totally absorbed into the full-climax Chaga. From his backpack, Langrishe took a squeaky plastic elephant.

"Carla Bly's kid's," he explained. "I did ask first." He placed the toy in the path of the advance. Following his example, I hunkered on my heels to watch. The smiling green elephant broke out in a psoriasis of yellow spots which multiplied with appalling speed to cover the entire

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surface. Within fifteen seconds the toy was a mass of sea-anenome-like extrusions. I watched the green elephant collapse and dissolve into a pool of oily sludge which, even as it seeped into the ground, was generating furiously reproducing clusters of sulphur yellow crystals.

"We assume they're alien biological packages because, given a plethora of impossible hypotheses, that seems the least improbable: that the earth is on the receiving end of an alien colonization program. Truth is, we have no evidence that this theory is any more credible than the more incredible ones. The packages appear out of nowhere on the deep-space trackers, make a couple of fast orbits, and then execute an aero-braked descent. We've been scanning the sun's Local Group of stars with our deep-space tracking facilities for the past five years without the slightest hint as to their point of origin. But they still keep coming: that one last month in Cameroun; the one six months back that splashed down in mid-Atlantic—submarine surveys say something's happening along the mid-Atlantic ridge, but they don't know exactly what. *This* was the first, that we know of; the second one came down in the Bismarck Archipelago, the third hit in the old Aberdare National Park up to the north, another took out a dam in the Amazon basin, another came down in the Ecuadoran Andes, three others in mid-ocean; but they all came down within three hundred kilometers of the Equator. Fancy a walk?"

He indicated the advancing Chaga. I shuddered. Where the green elephant had sat smiling, a bubble of ochre polymer was expanding.

"Dinner, then."

Dinner was a table out under the enormous African night; moon, wine, candles; picking at our food and feeding each other choice morsels of biography for dessert, the wheres, whens, whos of our lives. I loved every minute of it. I've never said a harder goodnight in my life.

And with the morning, we flew.

At the sight of the flimsy film wings, the eminently snappable struts and one's utter exposure to sky and gravity, this Moon very nearly chickened. Langrishe reassured me that they were equipped with smart systems that made it almost impossible to crash or stall them, they virtually flew themselves, and if I *really* wanted to experience the Chaga this was the only way I could get close, and because this Moon was going to impress or die that morning, I said, what the hell, yes, why not! While he was filing a flight plan with security, I put on my helmet and waggled my feet in the steering stirrups, and the solar wing fed power to the engine, and the next thing I knew we had shaken ourselves free from the wrinkled skin of Africa. Airborne, *flying*, at once terrifying and liberating. I wanted to laugh and scream as we banked (flash of iridescence as our wings caught the sun) and wheeled. Before us: the White Mountain, casting off its concealment of cloud, the eternal snows high and

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pure and holy; below us: birds and things that were not quite birds fled from the shadow our wings cast over the jumbled canopy of the Chaga. Langrishe waved, pointed: a flotilla of silver balloons bowled through the air just above the treetops. At his signal, we banked our dragonfly craft to pursue—each blimp carried a passenger like a large silver octopus—banked again. Chaga, sky, Kilimanjaro, all whirled into crazy juxtaposition, and I was lost. Transported. I do not know how long I flew, where I flew, how I flew; I seemed at times a fusion of woman and wing, Icarus ascending on beautiful, foolish arms; the forest, the mountain, the high, white tableland diffracting refracting dazzling hypnotizing under the sun. . . . Mystical? Transcendent? I cannot say what I experienced, except to echo Thomas Merton's description of God as the pure emptiness of light where the self dissolves into the cloud of unknowing, of which one cannot, of necessity, speak.

On our return to earth, we did not speak, we could not speak; the sexual, spiritual tension between us was too strong for words. In his office, we tore like vultures at each other, stripped each other, ecstatically, soul-naked for the long, deep, plunge into each other; kisses desperate and naïve as ancient clay cuneiforms. Under the shadow of the White Mountain, desperate, desperate love. . . . God, Langrishe, I want you!

It has been several hours since the last skeleton of a baby. Like the others, it was wedged in a cleft of a fan-coral; like the others, it was terribly deformed. The pain was so old and eroded that I could pick through the bones with the same detachment that I would examine a dead bird. The tiny, eyeless skull, distended into a sweeping crest of bone; the jaws fused shut in one seamless ridge of enamel; the fingers long and delicate as those of a bat—the slightest touch snapped them—terminated in rounded open sockets. Like the others I had encountered on the WaChagga pathways, it had been deliberately abandoned. Ritual infanticide. Paradise exposed; the price of compromise of Chagga with Chaga?

Cooler now, higher. I have had to supplement my ethnic fashions with my dearly loved leather jacket. I must look like a fetish-figure from a sword'n'sorcery fantasy. The unremitting claustrophobia of the forest robs me of a sense of location: I find myself searching for some breach in the walls so that I can re-establish my relationship with the surface of Africa. Certainly I must be close to the heartlands; the density and diversity of the ecosystem is staggering. Writing this, I am overshadowed by stands of what I can only describe as giant toadstools crossed with oil refineries: caps and tubes; elsewhere on today's climb, I have encountered groves of coiled cornucopias, vagina-mouths wide enough to swallow me

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whole; miniature mountain ranges of what look like bright orange worm-casts, three times my height and waving feathery extrusions. Small estates of squat cylindrical pillars, an abandoned adobe, seeping a semen-like froth from their open tops. Organisms as transparent and fantastic as marine radiolarin, magnified a thousand times. . . . What would the Ol Tukai researchers give just for me to have brought a camcorder with me!

Corresponding with the accelerating diversity of the flora, I am encountering new and quite alien forms of fauna. Creatures like aerial manta rays cluster around a tangle of vivid lilac intestines; the first sight of them winging through the forest toward me sent me diving to cover, two million years of instinct, but as they passed over, I saw they had no mouths. How do they feed? Too many mysteries, I haven't the time; as I have said, this is not an expedition, this is a pilgrimage. Heart of Darkness, eh, Conrad? You don't know the half of it. Mistah Kurtz, he dead.

You damn well better *not* be, Langrishe. You hear me?

There are others in this new land; like the WaChagga, they have *adapted*. As I progress toward the cloud layer, their presence becomes more and more evident: rafts of birds struggling to take wing, weighed down by sponge-like encrustations on their heads and legs, others ridden piggyback by objects like diseased organs. The vervet monkey I saw, with the parasitic dorsal ridge, is no freak here. Some monkeys possess octopus tentacles in addition to their own arms and legs, some sport antlers of green coral studded with hundreds of tiny blue abalone eyes. Some are carpeted in a green mold that I assume must enable them to photosynthesize like plants, for their mouths have fused shut under whorls and ridges of raw bone. Some of the young I have seen clinging to their mothers' backs bear the same deformities I saw in the abandoned children of the WaChagga. Yet none seem in distress from their multilations, and all are obviously thriving. Is this their absorption into the symbiotic life of the Chaga? Is the law of the jungle being re-written?

More than monkeys and birds have come to terms with the aliens. A sudden crashing approaching through the understory, a stand of tall, brittle umbrella trees trampled down, and an elephant entered the clearing. It raised its trunk to test taste touch the air; around its neck was a red, veiny mass of flesh reaching down along the tusks to elongate into two prehensile tentacles, each terminating in something shockingly like a human hand. I remained hidden in the cover of a grove of translucent cistern-plants. Scenting the presence of its ancestral enemy, the elephant turned and withdrew into the bush. Another pact with the Chaga.

When I heard the movement in the hooting, trilling dark that night, I feared it was another visit of the long-legged tripod creature that had

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reconnoitered my camp two nights before, stroking my few intimate possessions with long feathery cilia. I have a deep and entirely proper dread of all things clicking and chitinous. I held my breath.

"Greetings to you in the name of the Lord Jesus. . . ." I almost screamed. "Peace sister, I am only a humble servant of my Lord. Pastor Hezekiah, minister to the lost and light to the found. Tell me, sister, do you love the Lord?"

He moved into the range of my biolights.

Hezekiah: bifurcated man—your right side is flesh and blood, your left a garden of tiny white flowers, trumpet-mouths opening and closing flicking forked tongues to taste the air; your left eye observes the world from a half-dome of blossoms and roots; your left arm is a swollen club of green flesh fused shut upon a decomposing black Bible. Too strange to terrify me, Hezekiah. To me you were almost . . . beautiful.

He was dressed in a memory of old Anglican vestments. His speech was deeply beautiful, enriched by decades of exposure to the towering cadences of the Authorized Version. I did not feel any threat or darkness about him, rather, a sad holiness that made me move my little jars of biolight into a circle as an invitation to enter.

He had evolved a complex and curiously satisfying theology around the Chaga, in which God had cast him in the role of a latter-day John the Baptist: the voice crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the Way of the Lord! With reverential fervor, he expounded his credo that, in the shape of the Chaga, the millennium was at hand, the Kingdom of Heaven come down to Earth: "Is it not written sister, that a star shall fall from heaven, and its name shall be Wormwood, and that one third of all the growing things and creeping things upon the earth shall be destroyed? Does it not say that the New Jerusalem itself shall come down out of the heavens?" His brother preachers had been blinded to this truth by Satan and had denounced it as ungodly; to him alone had been granted the vision, and in obedience he had come out from the midst of the scoffers and unbelievers, left his small parish near Kapsabet, and walked the five hundred kilometers to the mountain of God. In the towns he passed through, he would preach his new revelation and call the orphans of Babylon to the slopes of Mount Zion and the advent of the Second Adam and Eve. "Eden!" he declared, including the singing forest with a wave of his Bible-hand. "The new Eden! The Earth redeemed and cast in the perfect image of God. What we had seen previously as in a glass darkly, we shall now see clearly and without distortion." His pilgrimage followed a divinely-ordered spiral around the mountain, each level corresponding to a new degree of spiritual grace and enlightenment: as he reached the summit and the pinnacle of transfiguration, his own personal transfiguration would be completed, changed from glory into glory, into the like-

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ness of Christ his master. It was a mark of God's grace that he was half-transfigured already. He touched his mantle of flowers, eyes shining with ecstasy.

I envied him his fine madness. I asked him were the WaChagga disciples of his. "Degenerates," he denounced them. "They would not receive the Lord, so I have shaken their dust off my feet. God has spit them out of His mouth, they shall not see the glory." I asked him had he seen a white man, a *m'zungu,* in the forest. "Yes, many months ago, a *M'zungu,* from the Research Facility." When I asked where the *m'zungu* had been headed, he pointed up into the mists. He prayed a blessing over our sleep and in the morning he was gone, moving from glory to glory. But I could not rid myself of the sensation that he shadowed all that day's march: a half-glimpsed suggestion of a figure that could as easily have been a delusion of the prismatic perspectives of the forest. I stopped, called his name, waited for him, several times during today's climb, but the Chaga kept silence.

T.P. knew it. Mrs. Kivebulaya knew it. Phylis at the Irish Embassy, who let me have her day-old copies of the Cork *Examiner,* knew it. The entire office, from venerable tea-lady to junior runner, knew it.

Moon was in love.

The Celts invented the concept of romantic love.

He actually left messages for me pinned to the Thorn Tree in the cafe of the New Stanley Hotel, a thing no one has in any seriousness done since the shadow of Hemingway stalked the bars and country clubs; dates and arrangements for champagne breakfasts overlooking the Rift Valley, night trains to Lake Victoria (a teak and brass time machine focused fifty years in the past), hiking expeditions in the N'gong Hills, camera safaris to Lake Turkana, microlyting over the Maasai Mara. Impossibly romantic. Horrendously expensive. Moon loved every second of it. T.P. found it simultaneously hilarious and pitiable.

Suddenly the five hundred pages of notes, the hundred and twenty two hours of taped interviews, the twelve box files full of associated documents that I had been avoiding like a persistent creditor, seemed to spontaneously combust under my fingers. T.P. watched in dumb amazement from his Captain Kirk chair as the spirit of the Chaga reached out and possessed me. Finally, to save me from myself, and save his afternoons of contemplative crossword-solving and street-watching, he ordered me out of his office and sent me to pursue my demonic muse in the sultry climate of the coast. He obtained an indefinite lease on a beach-edge *banda* half an hour's drive north from Mombasa and sent me off on the overnight train with a ream of A4 and a Remington portable that barely qualified for the description.

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Silence and solitude unbroken. I drove that Remington portable into the ground; well after dark, homeward-wending shell-sellers were surprised to see me working chthonically on the verandah by the light of oil lamps. At two o'clock, I would tumble through the mosquito nets into bed and sleep until dawn, when I would rise and run, or swim, before breakfast in the hotel up the beach. Then I would plunge into the book and not surface until dinner time. By Friday, I would be exhausted but glowing and waiting eagerly for the headlights of the Ol Tukai 4×4 to come weaving through the palm trees, the herald of two days of swimming, sunbathing, sleeping with Langrishe.

We all carry around a box of snapshots of our loves. Riffle, shuffle, deal them again.

Two figures running down the surf-line, running for the joy of using their bodies to push at the limits of their selves; the dawn coming up behind black thunderheads out of India and the world waiting, crouching in the indigo, waiting to be reborn. They make love in the shower, licking the salt sweat from each other's skin.

An ebony bed, brought down by dhow from Mogadishu for the Sultan of Mombasa's pleasure. After centuries, the wood had not lost its perfume.

Sudden, savage rain, beating on the palm thatch.

The moon, huge on the seaward edge of the world. The call of the moonpath: to the sea! to the sea! The man and the woman burst from the water like creatures newly created, like drops of fire from the fingers of God, before they sink again into the amniotic embrace and each other.

Still life: she, absorbed in her book with the moths butting softly against the globe of the oil lamp; he, in his wicker chair, watching. Just watching.

All things were a prelude to sex. Respighi's symphonic poems amongst the trees at batflight. Wading thigh-deep through the blood warm ocean. Hands lovingly oiling me against the sun. . . .

After, in that black Arab bed, he would explore that land of heart's desire, the high, white tableland beyond the clouds.

"Who are they? A day doesn't dawn that I don't ask myself that question a dozen times: who *are* they? The satellite cameras have looked through the clouds to show us the things that are up there—amazing things, forms and systems more complex than any we've yet discovered—entire tracts of forest that seem like animate cities. Why? For whom? When? Are *they* already abroad in their living cities, have we seen them and not recognized them? Have we indeed seen the faces of the masters of the Chaga, in those satellite photographs, and not recognized them?

"Or then again, it may be that the time is not yet right for them: all is prepared, the stage set, but the principal performers have yet to make their entrances. How could they have put an entire world into something

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not much larger than this room? Will they make themselves known to us? One day, will our survey expeditions go to the edge of the Chaga and find *them* waiting? Will they come soon, will they wait until their grip on our world is more secure? Are they delaying so that they may deal with us as equals, or is that moment centuries distant, when the whole earth is changed into their likeness? Who are they? Most of all, *that* question; every day, every minute, that question casts its shadow over everything else: *who are they?* Moon . . . Moon?"

He would never notice that I had turned away from him, staring at the tracks the beetles left on the wall.

With the morning, he would be gone. I was not woman enough to hold him—the mountain had a more primal claim on him. I knew he would leave me, at the last, for that other love. I almost told him to go, rather than bear the pain of having him leave me. To love someone so much you will give him away rather than lose him, does this make sense? Yet every time that 4×4 came swinging through the palms, I would throw myself on him and drag him down, into that Arab bed.

I could smell it in the wind, the day the houseboy from the tourist hotel half a mile up the beach came panting to my verandah to tell me there was a telephone call for me, most urgent. I followed in a daze of numb serenity. When Dorothy Bazyn regretted to inform me that Peter Langrishe had failed to return to the Oloitiptip Research Facility after a microlyte survey of the north western sector of the Chaga, I experienced a colossal sense of guilty relief, of a kind I have not felt since my mother finally surrendered to the cancer that had taken six years to kill her. I almost laughed, but a preventing hand around my heart restrained me, like a mailed glove. That same glazed calm accompanied me home on the train, until I saw T.P. waiting for me amid the porters and taxi drivers at Nairobi Station and all restraint fled. I was shattered like a soapstone pot; the interior emptiness it had shaped was lost in the greater emptiness without. I cried for an hour all over his pure silk suit.

I sank into a deep, dark depression. Weeks, months, disappeared behind me. The book sat three-quarters complete on my desk at 224b Tom M'boya Street. T.P. was always there, to listen when I wanted to talk, to merely *be* when I could not talk. He preserved me from some of the more disgusting excesses of self-pity: stopping me drinking myself stupid, flushing the cocaine I had bought from an American consular official down the *choo*. I think he would have slept with me if that would have helped the healing. Over tea at a questionable Chinese restaurant tucked behind the Kenyatta Conference Center, I asked him why it hurt so much, still. He said it was because I was in love with Langrishe, still. We toyed with the mottoes from our fortune cookies, pretending all sorts of things.

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"T.P."

He lit one end of his motto in the candle flame.

"You're right. I still love the bastard, so bad I know I will never, never be free of him. God, I love him. I am going mad without him. What's the line from that old song?"

" 'I can't live, with or without you.' "

"T.P., will you help me find him?"

I think that was the only time I ever succeeded in surprising him.

The very next day: "I have a little something for you. Out back, if you would care to take a look?"

I don't know how he had managed to put the thing up in the postage-stamp backyard; certainly his office staff looked very pleased with themselves. The microlyte was black and green, like a proud and beautiful dragonfly. I could not speak, merely run my hands over the wings, the struts, the power unit; appreciating it by touch.

"T.P., it must have cost a fortune."

"It did. Presuming that, as a typical romantic, you haven't the least idea about how to bring your plan to fruition, I took the liberty of engaging in a little logistical thought: great amusement, by the by. You can dismiss immediately any thought you might have entertained of obtaining a security clearance from Oloitiptip. Dorothy Bazyn does not want a second Missing in Action on her quarterly report, and I presume you have enough wit not to even *think* of trying to make it past the perimeter patrols on foot; the odds of you ending up in a bodybag, that is, after the soldiers gang-rape you, is in the region of 98 percent. However, if you were to find a secluded spot, say, fifty kilometers from Kilimanjaro, and fly in just above ground level underneath the radar net, the odds are a little more favorable. At least, if they open up with twenty-millimeter cannon, you won't feel anything. So, I made a few, ah, purchases?" I almost kissed him.

We worked fast, furious, we did not stop to consider what we were doing; the face of our madness might have turned us to stone. Deep dark truth in the mirror. *The Last Safari,* T.P. christened it, but I told him that had been a film with Stewart Granger. "That was *King Solomon's Mines,*" he said. "With Deborah Kerr."

We drove down to a place on the road south, just outside of Ilbisil township; a bend, a baobab, and a lot of sky. T.P. unpacked the microlyte—he had borrowed the Irish Ambassador's Range Rover for the occasion ("He owes me, the Garibaldi affair,")—and assembled the aircraft under the watchful gaze of a dirty, gawky Maasai kid, materialized out of five hundred square kilometers of nowhere, as they tend to. All three of us were most impressed when the propeller actually turned.

"Well, aren't you going to give Deborah Kerr a kiss for luck?"

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Hands in pockets, T.P. contemplated the landscape. "Among the Dinka tribesmen of Sudan," he said, "the baobab is known as the Tree Where Man Was Born. In Kenya, there is a common belief that the baobab disobeyed God by growing where *it* wanted to, in punishment for which, God uprooted it, turned it upside down, and thrust it back into the earth again. I think there may be a moral in that somewhere, Moon. What is there?"

"A moral, T.P."

"That's correct."

I kissed him anyway.

Five minutes later, I was airborne.

In the cloud forest, we face the final confrontation, the ultimate consummation. An appropriate enough stage for it, this high shoulderland of Kilimanjaro. In this season, the clouds hang unbroken for weeks on end. A landscape of moral ambiguity, all shades of gray . . . is this the Cloud of Unknowing? The Daliesque geometries of the Chaga, the ripples and veils of fog—suitably Macbethian for a Scot like Langrishe.

I came upon the clearing at the end of a heavy day's climb. The air was thin, every footstep was a shard of migraine exploding through my brain. When I found myself on the edge of the small, rocky defile that cut a jagged gash through the ubiquitous Chaga, I knew instinctively that this was to be the place. As I made camp, the fog capriciously swirled and dissolved; I found myself looking through a tree-lined window over the cloud-speckled plain of Amboseli. To be able to *see!* The many-colored land swept away beneath me to merge almost imperceptibly with the tawny earth-shades of Kenya. Those winks of light, that scattering of antiseptic white like spilled salt; the new facility at Oloitiptip; those plumes of dust: vehicles, perhaps aircraft taking off from the dry lake bed; those specks of black moving through the middle air: Army helicopters.

It is not good for the soul to look down from the mountain too long: I lingered until nightfall, and the more I looked, the more I felt myself despising the monotonous, starved landscape beyond the mountain, the more I rejoiced in the color and diversity of the Chaga. I did belong here.

He came that night. I was expecting him.

"Moon."

No doubt, no uncertainty this time. I was already reaching to shake my biolights into luminescence.

"No. No light."

"Why?"

"No light. Or I'll go. . . ."

"No! Don't go. Langrishe, where are you? Don't hide from me. . . ."

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"Moon . . . oh Moon. Don't make this difficult for me. I want to come to you; more than anything, Moon. Just to see you, here . . . why did you have to come, why could we not have left it where it lay and let it wither?"

"Langrishe, I couldn't leave you. I couldn't let it wither and die; it isn't like that, you know. It won't die, it can't die. Langrishe, listen to me. . . ."

A silence. Alone, in the dark, with the whole forest listening, I sat and hugged my knees to my chest. After a time, he spoke again.

"Those living cities along the snowline that we have seen in the satellite photographs . . . I've been there, up in the snows, Moon, I've explored those cities. The word 'city' barely describes what is up there; I've seen things that beggar the human imagination, things far beyond my comprehension; but *one* thing I understand—there is no race of aliens waiting buried in the soil to step forth and inhabit them. In a sense, we were right when we hypothesized that we might not be able to recognize the aliens; we do not recognize them because, Moon, we *are* the aliens. . . ."

I waited the rest of the night for him to return, shaking, and shaken, in my protective circle of biolights. The clouds were low and cold and drizzling the next day. Miserable hours; wrapped up in my sleeping bag in my hammock, I picked and pecked at Thomas Merton, but my mind was too full of birds and doubts to mirror the Benedictine's tranquility of solitude. Too long since I last read him; the vinyl cover of the book was a nauseating mash of pulpy crystals and froth. I ripped it off, threw it away, read the master in the nakedness of his own pages.

He came at nightfall, in the dripping freezing twilight.

"*Evolution,* Moon, catastrophic shifts to new levels of complexity. Do you understand? You must understand, it's vitally important that you understand. Evolution does not plod through history one steady gene at a time— Evolution dances, evolution leaps, from level to level; on the biological clock, the secondhand does not move continuously—it clicks from one minute to the next. Changes occur simultaneously throughout an entire population; within one generation, a population may shift to a higher level. Do you understand? Moon, you *must* understand!"

"Langrishe!" Empty, dripping darkness. I dreamed about his eyes all that night, terrible, terrible eyes, without a face.

Washing in the lukewarm waters of a cistern next morning, I heard my name in the mists.

"Go away, Moon. Before you came, there were never any choices to make, never another consideration; and when I left to come here, it was that way again. I knew what I wanted, what I was searching for, and now you have turned everything inside out again. I want to be with you, I want to run away from you, I love you, I am terrified of you."

I turned around slowly, scanning the gray silhouettes of undergrowth.

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"Langrishe . . . where are you?"

"Here, Moon." Shadow among the shadows, a man-shaped patch of mist. "No. No nearer. Please. Listen. I can't stay long. This is important. Fire will not burn it, poisons will not kill it, it thrives on our wastes and pollutions and can provide technological man with his every need: is the Chaga the next evolutionary step forward? Technological man fouls his nest with glee; will the nest reject him, or will the nest *adapt* itself so that he can live there without destroying it and himself?

"The protein life has had its day; now the new life has come and is sweeping it away. The change, Moon, the change."

As he spoke, I had closed the distance between us, one cat-cautious step at a time. I was within a handful of meters of him when he awoke from his self-absorption and noticed my proximity. He gave a cry as we saw each other, face to face. Then, in a flicker of movement, he was gone.

My heart pounded. Black phosphenes exploded noiselessly in my retinas, my blood roared. Those fears and dreads that had stalked my dreams. . . . Langrishe was still human.

That night, in my hammock, a touch on my cheek, a kiss. Mumbling like a great contented cat, I turned over and looked into his face and the soft sensual mass of his body pressed on mine. Mouths parted, lips met; I unzipped the sleeping bag to welcome him within, lifted my hands to touch him. "No," he said. "Please. Don't touch me. Promise me that, Moon."

"But why?"

"Because of you. Because I don't understand what it is about you that drives me mad. I'm mad to even *think* of doing this. Mad. Mad! What is it about you, woman?" I laid a finger to his lips; one second later our mouths met, and before I was even aware he had slipped inside me. I gasped in surprise, his tongue was at my nipples, his breath hot on my skin. He smelled of Chaga, musks, essential oils, the intimate perfumes of the orifices. His hands held mine above my head, sexual surrender as we plunged and pulsed in the absolute darkness of the senses. As his thrusts grew more frantic, his pace more urgent, his fingers released mine and my hands automatically fell to stroking his body, over the thighs, nails lightly raking the buttocks, tracing little spider-feet along the flanks, onto the gentle syncline of his back.

At my scream, the song of the Chaga fell silent for a minute.

My fingers were entwined in a holdfast of veins and tubes rooted in the base of his spine; a throbbing umbilical that bound him to God knows what out there in the darkness. He leapt away from me, naked, shivering, dripping; I vomited endlessly, emptily.

"Oh God oh God oh God oh God. . . ."

"I told you I told you, I *told* you not to touch. . . ."

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"You bastard, you bastard, what have you done, oh my God. . . ."

"*Why* did you have to come here, why did you not go when I *asked* you, *why* did you have to reawaken all the things I had forgotten, why did you have to make me *human* again?"

"Human?" I screamed. "Human? My God, Langrishe, *what are you?*"

"You want to see?" he screamed back. "You want to know? Look! Look well!" He pointed a quivering finger at me. A ponderous crashing from the night-forest, something huge, that knows it can take forever to get where it wants. "Look!" screamed Langrishe again, and suddenly the ravine was bright with biolights. "I can do anything with it I like. Who do you think fed you, watered you, watched you, guided you?" Into the amphitheater of light came a great mound of flesh, taller than a man, wider; ribbed with veins and arteries and patches of scabrous yellow mold. Clusters of organs swayed as it advanced on two massively-muscled legs. Lacy antennae feathered from barnacle-like warts along its back; it turned toward me, raised itself up on its clawed feet, and extended an array of mandibles and claspers. Its belly was an open vagina, connected to Langrishe by the umbilical cord.

I felt I was going mad.

The umbilical retracted, drawing Langrishe into the raw red maw. It closed around him, advanced another step on me. Langrishe's face regarded me from a cowl of red flesh.

"I tried to tell you Moon, but you refused to understand. Evolution. The future, Moon. The *future* man. *Homo Symbioticus*. The orthobody. A completely self-contained environmental unit. Imagine an end to sickness and disease, bodies that will heal our every illness, that will repair and regenerate our bodies; why, I am effectively immortal! Imagine no pain, no war, imagine the very *ability* of one human to cause another human pain abolished; we can have that, the orthobodies have a system of neurological checks that make it impossible to translate a violent thought into violent action. Imagine—no more want, no more hunger, for the orthobody lives on sunlight, air and water like the plants, and every man will be able to draw what he needs from the endless resources of the forest. Imagine—a world without ignorance; my brain is linked with the orthobody's brain, which can process information with the speed of a computer; what is more, it can link into another orthobrain, so that the total of all human knowledge is accessible by every man, woman, and child; knowledge is no more the privilege of an educated class, the heritage of humanity is the *right* of all humanity. Imagine—the richness of experience and emotion of a Shakespeare or a Michaelangelo the birthright of *everyone;* imagine eyes that can see into the infra-red and the ultraviolet, new spectrums of hearing, the ability to taste, smell, touch

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things you never conceived of before; in addition to new senses, new *awarenesses* that I cannot even begin to describe to you, Moon!"

"Horrible!" I cried. "Horrible!"

"No, *glorious!* The next evolutionary leap! If man cannot live harmoniously with his planet, his planet must adapt to live harmoniously with man. Moon, I understand your fear; it looks dreadful, it seems monstrous; believe me, it is more wonderful than you can ever imagine. I feel like . . . a god, Moon. A god!"

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams.

"God, Langrishe. . . ."

"So, what will Moon do, then? Will she go back? Will she come down from the mountaintop; to *that?* Can you go back, after what you've seen, after the wonder and glory you've touched here? Or will she stay, with me? You loved me enough to come here to find me; do you love me enough to *stay?* Am I any more monstrous than I would be if I lay paralyzed in an iron lung? If I had leprosy? You would love me *then*—can't you love me now?"

No, not a god, Langrishe, a devil, and a subtle one at that, a driver of devil's bargains. My mind was a firestorm of doubts and confusions; through the conflagration, the numb roaring, I reached out to touch him, lay a hand on the red ridged flesh beside his face. "Oh, Langrishe. . . ."

"You said we were one. You said we were inadequate parts of a unity, each incomplete without the other. I'm not saying that you have to become like me; you don't have to pass into an orthobody, you can just stay with me, as you are, and we can know each other as we did, before. . . ."

"Langrishe. . . .

"Moon, I love you."

But I had already fled into the night.

The sifting of the ashes: all the emotional underpinnings upon which the life of Moon had been built have collapsed into embers. If only he had not said that. If only he had not said that he loved me, it might have been bearable then. Why did you always have to make *me* the guilty one? Was it *always* like this, was our love mere explorations of new ways of causing pain to each other? Was all we needed from each other a mirror in which to examine ourselves?

He will come again for me, soon, come calling, through the mist and the forest that lies across the shoulders of Kilimanjaro. And I do not know what I will do then. That is why I am completing this journal: the fury of the condemned man's diary. The longest journey is the journey inwards; it is also the journey from which return is least possible. Of all travelers, it is most true for the pilgrim that you can't go home again.

The pilgrim that comes down from the mountain will not be Moon:

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Moon died, up there under the breath of the snows: what returns to earth will be as changed within as Langrishe is without. And if I stay . . . I cannot become like that. I cannot accept that this is the future for humanity—an eternity of graceless hedonism, browsing in the great world-forest, each man an island entirely sufficient unto himself? No, I reject it. Do you hear me, Langrishe, I reject it!

I must finish now. I can hear him calling, he is coming for me. I have not much time to complete this record, and still I am undecided. Maybe this will not be my last entry after all. T.P., if this journal should ever find its way back to you, by my hand, by the hand of another, even if you may not understand it yourself, try to make the world understand. It is possible to love the heart of darkness even while being repelled by it.

He is here now, I must put down my pen for today. Tomorrow? Tomorrow. . . . ●

NEXT ISSUE

Walter Jon Williams returns to these pages in our September issue, taking us to a hostile, high-tech future for a hard-edged and compelling tale of space warfare, corporate intrigue, greed, and betrayal, as well as examining some fundamental—and disturbing—questions of identity, in the taut and powerful "Solip:System"; don't miss this big, hard-hitting new novella from one of science fiction's fastest-rising new stars. Hot new writer **R. Garcia y Robertson** is also on hand for September, sweeping us along on a fast-paced chase through the ages, as a shrewd young Yankee girl and a brooding Viking giant flee from time-traveling slavers through the Indian nations of pre-colonial North America, in the wild, wry, and pyrotechnic "Not Fade Away," another big new novella you won't want to miss.

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER: new writer **Greg Egan** returns with a fascinating look at some of the secrets—and some surprising ones there are, too—to be found in "The Safe-Deposit Box"; the madcap **Esther M. Friesner** takes us along on a very modern woman's very modern date in modern Manhattan with a very *old*-style bachelor, in the wry and funny "Blunderbore"; **Charles Sheffield** returns with a grisly high-tech shocker, as he examines a "Health Care System" that most of us probably would *not* care to employ; new writer **Patricia Anthony** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a First Contact story of a *very* unusual sort, in the disquieting "For No Reason"; and **Ronald Anthony Cross** returns with another wild and funny look at the hazards of life as a tabloid journalist, in the gonzo tale of what can happen to "Two Bad Dogs." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our jam-packed September issue on sale on your newsstands on July 24, 1990.

COMING SOON: Big new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Kim Stanley Robinson, Judith Moffett, Allen Steele, Ian Watson, Keith Roberts, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Neal Barrett, Jr., Tanith Lee, Alexander Jablokov, Isaac Asimov** himself, and many others.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Sino Saga

Chung Kuo—Book 1: The Middle Kingdom

By David Wingrove

Delacorte, $19.95

Several biggies this month, of which the biggiest is *Chung Kuo* by David Wingrove. It might be described as an epic, but I think that saga is the more apt word, since this is first of seven volumes which will apparently follow the histories of several characters and very possibly their children and children's children through heaven knows how many years. The background is the important thing here: it's a future Earth (the novel starts in the year 2190) dominated by the Chinese. Nay, not dominated— totally ruled. And not the *Communist* Chinese, but a neo-Confucianist society governed by "The Seven," each of which has a continent or so. Each continent seems to have only one enormous multi-leveled city—that's *enormous*, three hundred levels high and covering a large percentage of each continent. The Cities are literally built over the ruins of our civilization, and the bottom level of each city is called "the Net," designed to keep out the leftover inhabitants of "the Clay" (dirt level) who have returned to a squalidly primeval (not to mention practically lightless) existence, as well as the diseases of said inhabitants.

Also built over is the real history of mankind, which has been revised to glorify Chung Kuo (the Middle Kingdom, China, now meaning all the Earth). The revisions have it that after the Chinese Empire conquered the Romans, all civilization and innovation was Chinese. *Hung Mao* (whites) are prominent in the government; there is a certain amount of prejudice, but they are not actively persecuted. The basic philosophy of this worldwide culture is that of ancient China—change is considered the bringer of evil and war, but cracks are appearing in the century-long peace that has evolved from this philosophy because the population of the Cities is bursting at the seams—the world now has thirty-four billion people.

Just describing the background strains the space resources of this column, and there'd be room for nothing else this month if I went into details of plot and/or characters. There seem to be thousands of the latter; it takes about half the book to even figure out who the major characters are—many of

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those who seem so early on, die or disappear from the plot rapidly. The three who will probably provide the linkage to following books are all children during this novel: Kim, who by pluck and luck has risen from the Clay, but who is really the byblow of a high placed adventurer from "Above"; Ben Shepherd, scion of the Hung Mao family which has acted as advisers to the "T'ang" (ruler) of Europe; and Li Yuan, second son of that T'ang who during the novel becomes heir. All three boys are supernaturally mature, intelligent and perceptive, which strains the credulity a bit.

The scattershot plot revolves around the long term attempt by a group of dissident Hung Mao, highly placed in business and politics, to reinstitute the concept of progress (scientific and otherwise) and change in Chung Kuo. There's a lot of intrigue, murders, and assassinations, and the action ranges from the low of the Clay to the high of a building spaceship.

It's interesting that the author, at least in this first novel, doesn't really seem to tilt toward either side of the story's East/West dichotomy. Both factions have their share (perhaps more than their share) of bloodthirsty, treacherous types; if anything, the bias is toward the Eastern world rulers and their philosophy. Certain factors in the whole created background don't quite ring true (I was never quite convinced that this was a working worldwide system), but it's still one of those orgy reads, speeding along at a good clip and avoiding (sometimes barely) the repetitious. The major problem is in sorting out the Chinese characters—Chinese nomenclature tends to look somewhat alike to the untutored Western eye.

Compelling Eye

Eye of the World
By Robert Jordan
St. Martin's, $24.95 (cloth), $12.95 (paper)

We open on the eve of a bucolic folk festival with fireworks.

Over *there* are the Mountains of Mist.

The hero's companion is named Perrin.

There are menacing dark riders on the roads.

There's a race of large, tree-loving, long-lived beings who think humans are "hasty."

There's an innkeeper named Brandelwyn.

One runs into some of these classic echoes early in Robert Jordan's *Eye of the World*, and one groans slightly. "If we *must* have clones, why can't they at least be original clones," I thought (illogically, but you know what I mean).

Well, reader, on page 57 (of over six hundred), a door bursts open, and the novel takes off without looking back (almost). Robert Jordan can write one hell of a story, and if from time to time there are factors that are a little too close to a Great Original, that can be en-

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tirely forgiven as one is swept along.

It is, of course, a journey by a band of variegated companions across a magic world. It is not a quest, per se, but a flight. The hero, Rand, a handsome young shepherd, and two of his friends are apparently being sought by representatives of the Dark One, much to their confusion. (Two Rivers, their out-of-the-way village, seldom has ordinary visitors, much less dark riders, the Myddraal, and hordes of ravening trollocs—it is the latter who burst down Rand's door.) By luck (but of course it isn't just luck), there are also two other visitors in Two Rivers. One visitor is Moiraine, a woman of the legendary Aes Sedai (read elf-surrogate, but more than that originally. They are humans with powers that make them more than human, now only female because the male Aes Sedai were responsible for the Breaking of the World at the instigation of the Dark One some thousands of years ago.) The other visitor is a Warder, Lan, one of a band of humans bound to the Aes Sedai. The Aes Sedai are regarded with deep suspicion, if not downright loathing, by most humans for their part in the long-ago catastrophe, though they are still powerful; one, in fact, is a chief advisor to the Queen of Andor, the realm of which Two Rivers is nominally a part.

Moiraine is convinced that the three young men will find safety only in Tar Valon, the seat of Aes Sedai power. And so they're off, taking with them two of the young women of the village, who go along for their own reasons, as well as a gleeman, a wandering minstrel and one-man vaudeville show who seems awfully knowledgeable about things he shouldn't be. Subject to attacks by trollocs and the searching eyes of the Myrddraal, not to mention worse things, the little band makes its way across the troubled countryside.

Inevitably they become separated, during a battle with some very nasty inhabitants of a deserted city from the Age of Legends. Perrin and one of the young women fall in with some fey gypsy-like wanderers and a strange solitary man who is a wolf-friend, who leads Perrin to the discovery that he, too, is kin to the wolves (who are, for a blessed change, good guys!).

Then the pair fall into the hands of the Whitecloaks, the Children of Light (who are portrayed as looking something like the Teutonic Knights in *Alexander Nevsky*), a sect so dedicated to fighting the Dark One that they have become a sort of Inquisition.

Rand and his friend Mat, after many tribulations and encounters with Darkfriends, end up in Caemlyn, the capital city of Andor, where Rand has an unexpected encounter with the Queen and meets Loial, a member of the abovementioned long-lived race, who becomes a comrade. Here they are found by Moiraine and Lan, who have rescued the two held by the White-

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cloaks, but subsequent events prove that they can't reach Tar Valon safely.

Moiraine feels their only hope, and the only hope of the world, at this point (since obviously the Dark One has become too powerful to contain), is to go to the mysterious Eye of the World, the center of this world's magic, by the dubious route of "the Ways," magic paths from the Age of Legend to which only Loial's people can provide entrance. This trip is hair-raising, since the Ways have become a completely lightless, Escheresque labyrinth of ramps and islands floating in blackness.

What happens when they reach the Eye of the World I will not say (the novel reaches a satisfying climax, but there's obviously more to come), but getting there kept me up past my bedtime for three nights running—and it's been a long time since a novel's done *that*. Jordan keeps the suspense acute and the surprises and invention beautifully paced. I will register a mild complaint about the bits that are a little *too* reminiscent, as well as the fact that if one does make the comparison to the work that is called to mind by those bits, *Eye of the World*'s people are lacking in charm—and I don't mean charm-school charm, but that little extra characterization that makes the reader love the characters rather than just go along with them. But with a storyteller this compelling, just going along is an exhilarating experience.

Midwest Morgan

Castleview
By Gene Wolfe
Tor, $19.95

As those who have read Gene Wolfe's works know, he's a sly one, and the stylishly unexpected is his forte.

Any new Wolfe novel is inevitably going to be a surprise, whatever else it might be. And what might the latest, *Castleview*, be? Damned if I can put a label on it—so what else is new?

For about half the book, you suspect that the Wolfe is venturing into the King's domain, with a slightly quirky creepy novel. A married couple, the Schindler-Shields (she writes cookbooks and won't give up her maiden name), and their daughter Mercedes are inspecting a house for sale in the small Midwest town of Castleview; he's just bought an auto dealership there. It's explained that the town derives its name from the fact (not fancy) that a castle can often be seen in the distance (closer on wet nights); there are even photographs to prove it. From an attic window, Shields indeed sees the castle.

From this semi-mundane beginning, Wolfe weaves an extraordinary web of events that cover the next twelve hours or so, involving the newcomers and many of the town's inhabitants. Most of these events are also mundane (though violent—car crashes, disappearances, shootings, et al.), becoming fantasic only in the curious speed

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with which they transpire and the unlikely dovetailing of all of them (which only the reader sees).

However, as we go along we learn more about the rich store of legends which Castleview has accumulated over the century or so of its existence (only peripherally connected with the peripatetic castle, if at all), and people and things from these legends stealthily become involved with the evening's events. A clue as to where things are going (or coming from) is that a mysterious blonde woman whom we are led to recognize as a town ghost and who is sometimes accompanied by a man who we know is long dead, names herself Vivian Morgan.

Right. It's Arthur country we're in, but so obliquely (when is Wolfe anything else?) that someone unversed in Arthurian lore might get through the novel and never really know it. The night ends with most of the young people involved (Mercedes, her boyfriend, his young cousin, and sundry others) imprisoned in various parts of the castle. Their attempts to escape (helped by the cousin's swashbuckling, talking cat, G. Gordon Kitty) are balanced by the adults, who mount an expedition to rescue them, aided by a strange doctor who is obviously part of the faerie world, and who fights on the other side when it comes to a dustup. The climax has a twist which would seem to very much depend on knowledge of Arthurian lore plus some fancy guesswork on the part of the reader.

This farrago of events is presented as a speedy montage, jumping from one set of characters to another. Chapters tend to end with minicliffhangers such as "From upstairs came the sound of breaking glass" which, when the characters involved appear again, turn out to be nowhere near as portentous as they seemed. But they *do* keep you reading, and a summary of events in the novel doesn't do justice to the skillful pacing, the sly wit which sometimes makes you wonder if Wolfe isn't just spoofing you along, and the ingenious juxtaposition of some pretty unlikely ingredients.

On the downside, there are more loose ends than a pasta factory when you stop and think back after finishing *Castleview*, though they're of the "the author didn't bother to tell us" type rather than the "this doesn't make sense" type. And there are a couple of factors common to everything I've read by Wolfe. The characters are certainly three-dimensional, but you don't much care what happens to them; they are still only elements in the plot to be manipulated. And, perhaps correlative to this, the major impact of the book is its style; not here the pyrotechnic use of words and inventive people, places and things that made "The Book of the New Sun" so dazzling, but an equally flashy juggling of events and concepts on a smaller scale. The manner is major; the matter, when you come right down to it, doesn't seem to.

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It's Academic

The Illustrated History of Science Fiction
By Dieter Wuckel and Bruce Cassiday
Ungar, $24.50

Translated from the German, *The Illustrated History of Science Fiction* by Dieter Wuckel and Bruce Cassiday is indeed that, more or less. But the illustrations are in b&w and relatively uninteresting, and a large proportion of the text (which is fairly academic) is concentrated on European SF (Peter Stypov, Eberhardt del'Antonio, Heinz Hüfner, René Sussan). I'm not all that chauvinistic generally, but I do believe that SF has received most of its impetus and ideas from Anglo-American writers. And when the dust jacket promises us that the book takes us "right up to Stanislaw Lem and Ursula K. Le Guin," the suspicion is that it's not very au courant. If you're non-ethnocentric, however, it's recommended as a look at what's happened in the field elsewhere.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . One of the more unlikely titles to come along for a while is *Carmen Miranda's Ghost is Haunting Space Station Three*. It's from a song title, around which various authors such as C. J. Cherryh and Anne McCaffrey have written stories. The editor is Don Sakers (Baen, $3.95, paper) . . . . A collection of Walter Jon Williams' stories is called *Facets* (Tor, $17.95).

Reprints etc. . . . Edgar Rice Burroughs, the granddaddy of American SF, has been somewhat neglected of late, but comes the good news that Del Rey, which has done well by his Mars and Tarzan books (particularly with the glorious Whelan covers for the former), has acquired thirty-five of his other titles, including what may be his most conceptually innovative series, the Pellucidar books. (Pellucidar is the "world" which occupies the surface of the hollow inside of *our* world, and has a horizon that goes up, intelligent dinosaurs, luscious stone age maidens, and other fun things; Tarzan even paid a visit there and felt right at home.) The covers for the Pellucidar books will be by David Mattingly. ERB's pervasive influence was recalled to my attention lately via a news story which noted that the orphan street children of Khartoum call themselves "Tarzans."

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Devotees of Darkover will be happy to know that there's a new book in the series by Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Heirs of Hammerfell* (DAW, $18.95). . . . Tom Dietz has done a third in the odd and flavorful series of fantasies which began with *Windmaster's Bane*, and which mixes mythologies in an interesting way. The latest is *Darkthunder's Way* (Avon, $3.50, paper). . . . And Terry Pratchett's discworld whirls on its giddy way in *Sourcery* (Signet, $3.95, paper).

Science fiction non-fiction

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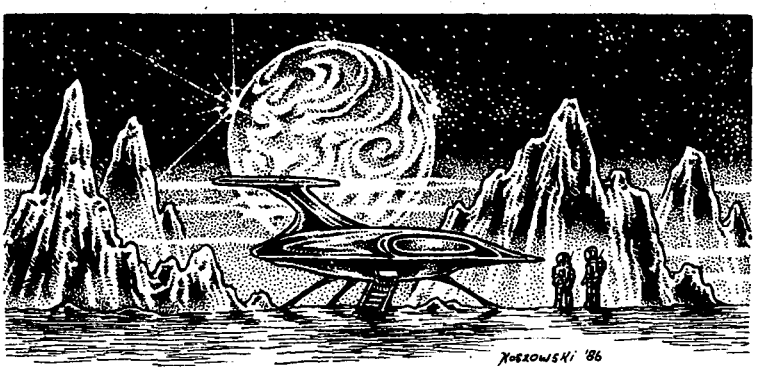
. . . *Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror: 1988* by Charles N. Brown and William G. Contento is the fourth in the exhaustive annual annotated listing of the three genres, new and reprint (Locus Press, PO Box 13305, Oakland CA 94661, $50). . . . A collection of essays by Samuel R. Delany about his own life, books, and working methods has been published under the title of *The Straits of Messina* (Serconia Press, PO Box 1786, Seattle WA 98111, $19.95). . . . *Grumbles From the Grave* is selected letters and excerpts from letters of Robert A. Heinlein, edited by Virginia Heinlein. Don't expect any great revelations, but there are interesting and amusing tidbits from a life intimately tied to the history of modern SF (Del Rey, $19.95).

Small presses, bless 'em . . . Pulphouse Publishing keeps turning out handsome and interesting little volumes at a great rate. The latest project is a sort of author-of-the-month periodical, "Author's Choice Monthly," which in each issue features the chosen author's selection of his own work. The author of issue #1 was George Alec Effinger, #2 Karl Edward Wagner, and by the time this sees print, there will have been issues devoted to Jack Williamson, Edward Bryant, Karen Joy Fowler, and Elizabeth Lynn, among others. There are various different editions of each issue (paper, cloth, deluxe) as well as special subscription rates, so you'd better write the Pulphouse people for information (Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The weekends around Independence Day launch the summer con(vention) season, with exams over and school out. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

JUNE 1990

28-July 1—**Origins. (404) 457-2490 or 996-9129.** Atlanta, GA. The world strategic gaming con.

29-July 1—**InConJunction.** Indianapolis IN. Adam's Mark Hotel. P. Farmer, the deCamps, Whelan.

29-July 1—**4th St. Fantasy Con. (612) 721-8800.** Sheraton, St. Louis Park MN, near Minneapolis.

JULY 1990

5-9—**WesterCon. (503) 283-0802 or 774-7592 or 239-0292.** Red Lion Janzen Beach Hotel, Portland OR. Vonda N. McIntyre, Ursula K. LeGuin, Kate Wilhelm, Art Widner, Steve Perry. The annual Western con.

6-8—**UniConze.** Cambridge University, Cambridge UK. The annual British University-based convention.

20-22—**ConVersion, Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9. (403) 242-4567 or 271-0662.** Named the Canadian national convention (CanVention) for 1990. Ben Bova, Spider Robinson and Jeanne Robinson.

20-22—**LibertyCon, c/o Bolego, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343. (615) 842-4363.** Van Vogt, Zahn, Tucker.

20-22—**GaylaxiCon, % GSFS, Box 1051, Back Bay Stn., Boston MA 02117.** For gay fans and friends.

27-29—**Travelling Fete, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307.** St. Petersburg FL. C. L. Fontenay.

27-30—**MythCon, Box 1091, Wheaton IL 60189.** Paxson, Dorsett, Wynne. High fantasy (eg., Tolkien).

AUGUST 1990

3-5—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258. (502) 448-6562.** Mike Resnick, Effinger, Laskowski.

23-27—**ConFiction, c/o Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $85 to 7/15.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $75 to end of June.

AUGUST 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $85 to 7/31/90.

AUGUST 1992

28-Sep. 1—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 275-0027.** The 1992 World SF Con. $65.

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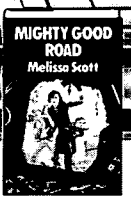

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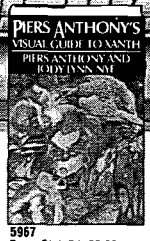

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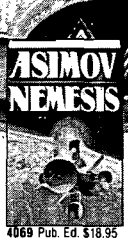

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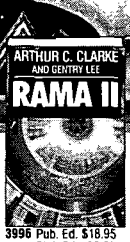

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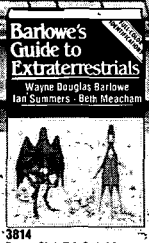

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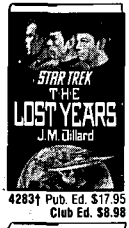

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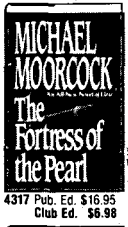

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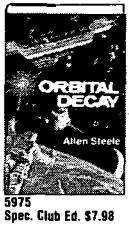

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